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Portfolio Section 1

Discuss two types of play and how these can be supported in practice. (755 words)

Play is widely recognised as a fundamental mechanism through which young children learn, develop, and interpret the world. It is not merely recreational but underpins cognitive, emotional, social, and physical growth. Froebel described play as the highest expression of human development, enabling children to construct knowledge through active engagement (Froebel, 1887). Contemporary research supports this view, linking meaningful play to creativity, resilience, and problem-solving (Howard, 2010).

Within Wales, play-based pedagogy is central to the Curriculum for Wales, which positions children as active participants in their learning and promotes exploration and independence (Welsh Government, 2022). This aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognising play as a fundamental right essential to healthy development (UN, 1989). However, the effectiveness of play depends largely on practitioner knowledge, intentional planning, and responsiveness.

This section critically discusses child-led play and sociodramatic play, evaluating their developmental benefits and how practitioners can support them in early years settings.

Child-led play refers to experiences initiated and directed by the child rather than structured by adults. Rooted in constructivist theory, Piaget (1952) argued that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment. When autonomy is supported, children typically demonstrate deeper concentration, intrinsic motivation, and sustained engagement.

Effective support requires enabling environments that are flexible rather than prescriptive. Open-ended materials such as blocks, loose parts, and natural resources encourage experimentation and independent thinking. Welsh guidance advises practitioners to “observe, listen and respond” to children’s interests instead of dominating their experiences (Welsh Government, 2022), reinforcing respect for children as capable learners.

The benefits extend beyond cognition. Autonomy in play is associated with improved emotional regulation, confidence, and resilience (Brock et al., 2014). From a parental perspective, this is often visible when children persist independently with activities such as construction, demonstrating pride in their achievements. While reflective insight should complement empirical evidence, it can strengthen professional understanding when critically considered.

However, complete autonomy may disadvantage children who require reassurance or structure, suggesting practitioner sensitivity is essential for equitable participation. Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development, where sensitive adult scaffolding supports emerging competence. Effective practice therefore lies not in choosing between adult-led or child-led approaches, but in the practitioner’s ability to move fluidly between roles according to children’s needs.

High-quality provision relies on careful observation to determine when intervention is appropriate. Rather than directing play, practitioners can extend thinking through open-ended questioning or introduce new vocabulary, reflecting the Welsh emphasis on responsive and individualised learning.

Sociodramatic play, commonly referred to as pretend or role play, involves children acting out real or imagined experiences and is strongly associated with language development and social competence. Vygotsky (1978) viewed imaginative play as a context in which children learn to regulate behaviour, negotiate roles, and understand social expectations.

Practitioners can support this play by providing stimulating environments with culturally familiar and inclusive resources. Home corners, healthcare kits, and small-world areas allow children to rehearse

everyday experiences, strengthening identity and belonging. The Welsh framework similarly emphasises environments that reflect diverse backgrounds and family structures (Welsh Government, 2022).

Pretend play often mirrors routines observed within the home, such as caring for a baby doll or preparing meals, demonstrating emerging empathy and social awareness. Nevertheless, the developmental impact of role play depends largely on the quality of the environment and intentional planning. Without thoughtful resource selection, role-play areas risk reinforcing stereotypes; inclusive practice must therefore remain a priority.

Excessive adult involvement can disrupt the natural flow of play. Effective practitioners adopt a facilitative role, modelling language or subtly introducing scenarios without removing the child's agency. Research indicates that this balanced participation supports more complex social interactions (Smidt, 2015).

International approaches further reinforce the value of play-based learning. Nordic education systems prioritise collaboration, imagination, and child autonomy, closely aligning with Welsh child-centred pedagogy and reflecting a growing global consensus regarding the developmental significance of play.

Both child-led and sociodramatic play are integral to high-quality early childhood practice. While child-led play nurtures independence and motivation, sociodramatic play strengthens communication, empathy, and social understanding. Neither is effective without skilled practitioners who balance freedom with thoughtful guidance.

Welsh policy frameworks reinforce the importance of play-based pedagogy, positioning practitioners as reflective professionals responsible for inclusive environments. Therefore, high-quality early years practice requires practitioners to apply play theories critically rather than prescriptively, adapting approaches to meet the diverse and evolving needs of children. Ultimately, the practitioner's role is not to control play but to recognise its developmental significance, ensuring every child has the opportunity to explore, imagine, and thrive.

Portfolio 2

Evidence of a clear understanding of why it is important for children to choose their own play and the importance of the role of the adult in children's play. (768 words)

Child-led play is widely recognised as a fundamental element of effective early years practice because it promotes autonomy, curiosity, and intrinsic motivation. When children choose their own play experiences, they become active participants in learning rather than passive recipients of adult instruction. Bruce (2012) explains that freely chosen play enables children to follow their interests, test ideas, and develop independence, contributing to deeper and more meaningful learning. This autonomy supports holistic development by strengthening emotional security, cognitive flexibility, and social competence.

From a developmental perspective, the importance of choice aligns with constructivist theory. Piaget argued that children construct knowledge through active engagement with their environment (Berk, 2012). Self-directed play encourages persistence, skill mastery, and adaptable thinking. For example, a child repeatedly selecting construction materials is developing spatial awareness, problem-solving ability, and early mathematical understanding. MacBlain (2021) notes that such active engagement strengthens neural connections and supports long-term cognitive development.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory further highlights the value of child-chosen play while emphasising the complementary role of the adult. Learning occurs most effectively when adults scaffold experiences within the Zone of Proximal Development (Doherty and Hughes, 2009). Observing self-selected play enables practitioners to identify developmental readiness and provide subtle support that extends learning without dominating it. For instance, if a child initiates role play around a shop, an adult might introduce mathematical language such as "more," "less," or "cost," enriching the experience while preserving agency. Moyles (2010) suggests that this balanced interaction transforms play into a powerful context for cognitive and social growth.

The importance of choice is also reflected in Welsh early years policy, which positions children as active agents in their learning journeys. The Curriculum for Wales promotes child-centred pedagogy and supports the development of independence, confidence, and belonging (Welsh Government, 2022). Similarly, the Foundation Phase framework recognises play as the primary vehicle for learning and encourages environments where children can make decisions and explore safely (Siencyn and Thomas, 2007). These perspectives reinforce that autonomy is essential for both wellbeing and developmental progress.

However, while child-led play is crucial, the role of the adult remains equally significant. Effective practitioners do not withdraw but adopt a responsive approach. Bruce (2012) describes the adult as both facilitator and co-learner, responsible for creating enabling environments that invite exploration. This includes providing open-ended resources, organising spaces that encourage interaction, and ensuring emotional security through predictable relationships. Dowling (2014) highlights that children engage more confidently in play when they feel emotionally supported, demonstrating the interconnected nature of relational care and learning.

Adult involvement must be carefully balanced. Over-direction can restrict creativity and limit independent thinking, whereas insufficient support may result in frustration or disengagement. Moyles (2010) argues that skilled practitioners know when to step back and when to intervene, using observation to guide decision-making. For example, if a child struggles to join peer play, an adult might model social language or facilitate turn-taking without controlling the interaction, thereby promoting inclusion while maintaining the integrity of child-led learning.

Personal experience as a parent further reinforces the value of allowing children to choose their play. Observing my own children, I have noticed that when they initiate activities themselves whether imaginative storytelling or constructing structures, they remain engaged for longer and demonstrate greater creativity. Adult-directed tasks, in contrast, are often completed with less enthusiasm. While personal reflection should complement rather than replace empirical evidence, it can deepen professional understanding and inform practice.

Nevertheless, child-led play does not imply an absence of structure. Practitioners must ensure environments are safe, inclusive, and responsive to diverse needs. Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton (2013) emphasise that inclusive practice requires adapting resources and interactions so that all children, regardless of ability or background, can participate meaningfully. This responsibility highlights the professional expertise required to support play without overshadowing it.

Play also offers valuable opportunities for observation and assessment. Smidt (2015) explains that children often reveal their deepest understanding during self-chosen activities because behaviour is authentic rather than performance-driven. Observing such play enables practitioners to identify developmental progress, interests, and areas for support, reinforcing that child autonomy and adult guidance are complementary elements of high-quality provision.

In conclusion, allowing children to choose their own play is essential for promoting independence, motivation, and holistic development. Theoretical perspectives from Piaget and Vygotsky demonstrate that active engagement supports cognitive and social growth, while Welsh policy validates child-centred approaches as central to wellbeing and learning. At the same time, adults play a crucial role in creating enabling environments, scaffolding learning, and ensuring inclusion. Effective early years practice therefore depends on achieving a thoughtful balance in which children lead their play while adults provide sensitive and informed support.

Portfolio Section 3

An In-Depth Discussion of Scale-Based Observations in Early Childhood (722 words)

Observation is central to effective early years assessment, enabling practitioners to monitor development, identify support needs, and inform planning (Smidt, 2015). Scale-based observations provide structured frameworks that assess children using predetermined criteria, allowing measurable and comparable outcomes. This section critically examines three scale-based tools: the Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS), the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), and the Leuven Scale of Wellbeing and Involvement, evaluating their strengths and limitations.

The Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS) is a developmental screening tool assessing domains including motor skills, communication, cognition, and social interaction (Bellman, Lingam and Aukett, 2003). Its structured format enables practitioners to compare development against age-related expectations, supporting early identification of delay. A key strength lies in its clarity and practicality, particularly in multi-agency contexts where consistent benchmarks are required.

However, SOGS has limitations. Development is not uniform, and children may demonstrate competence differently depending on cultural background, opportunity, or environment. By focusing primarily on milestone attainment, SOGS may overlook qualitative aspects of learning such as motivation or emotional wellbeing. The checklist format can also imply linear progression, potentially encouraging deficit-focused interpretations if age norms are applied rigidly. Consequently, SOGS is most effective as a screening tool supported by professional judgement and contextual understanding.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) assesses behavioural and emotional adjustment across domains including emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer relationships, and prosocial behaviour (Goodman, 1997). Its accessibility and efficiency are key strengths, as it produces quantifiable data that supports communication between practitioners, parents, and external professionals. It can provide early indication of potential social or emotional concerns.

Nevertheless, the SDQ relies heavily on adult perception, introducing subjectivity. Behaviour may be interpreted differently according to cultural expectations or practitioner bias (Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton, 2013). Additionally, children's behaviour is context-dependent; difficulties observed in one setting may not be evident in another. Without triangulation, there is a risk that SDQ findings reflect temporary circumstances rather than sustained developmental need.

The Leuven Scale of Wellbeing and Involvement, developed by Laevers (1994; 2005), shifts the focus from milestones and behaviour to the quality of engagement. It measures wellbeing, defined as emotional security and vitality, and involvement, characterised by concentration and intrinsic motivation. Each dimension is rated on a five-point scale. The theoretical foundation reflects humanistic and constructivist principles, proposing that deep learning occurs when children feel secure and are highly engaged.

A key strength of the Leuven Scale is its alignment with play-based pedagogy. High involvement indicates that a child is operating at the limits of capability, signalling deep-level learning (Laevers, 2005). Unlike SOGS, which measures attainment, Leuven evaluates the quality of participation, making it particularly suitable for early years environments where learning is embedded in play.

However, limitations exist. Scoring depends on practitioner interpretation and may lack consistency without adequate training (Smidt, 2015). Wellbeing can fluctuate due to temporary factors such as fatigue or environmental change, potentially affecting results. Moreover, while Leuven captures engagement effectively, it does not provide detailed assessment of specific developmental domains, meaning it cannot replace broader tools.

Across all three scales, reliability and validity depend on reflective implementation. While they provide structure and comparability, they risk oversimplifying complex development into numerical ratings. Cultural context, emotional state, and environmental influences must therefore be considered carefully (Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton, 2013). Repeated observations and professional dialogue strengthen interpretative accuracy.

Welsh early years policy promotes formative assessment embedded within everyday practice rather than formalised testing (Welsh Government, 2022). The Leuven Scale aligns closely with this approach as it can be integrated into natural play contexts. Although SOGS and SDQ may involve more structured administration, they can support inclusive practice when applied sensitively. The United Nations (1989) further recognises children's right to play, reinforcing the importance of developmentally appropriate assessment methods.

Ethical considerations underpin all scale-based tools. Confidentiality, informed consent, and sensitive communication with families are essential. Over-reliance on numerical scores may contribute to labelling if findings are not interpreted holistically (Smidt, 2015). Professional judgement therefore remains central.

In conclusion, scale-based observations offer valuable structure within early childhood assessment. SOGS provides systematic developmental screening, SDQ offers behavioural insight, and the Leuven Scale foregrounds emotional wellbeing and engagement. Each possesses distinct strengths and limitations, and none should be used in isolation. Effective practice requires integrating scale-based data with contextual awareness, reflective judgement, and collaboration with families to ensure meaningful and ethical assessment.

Portfolio Section 4

Demonstrate an understanding of the role of play when undertaking observations and assessments of children and consider how this affects the child's engagement and the accuracy of the observation

Play is central not only to children's development but also to effective observation and assessment within early years settings. Observing children during play provides insight into authentic behaviour, developmental progress, and emotional wellbeing. However, the context of play significantly influences children's engagement and therefore affects the accuracy and validity of observational data. Practitioners must critically consider how play shapes what is observed and how it is interpreted.

Constructivist theory supports the use of play as a context for assessment. Piaget (1952) argued that children construct knowledge through active exploration of their environment. When observed in self-initiated play, children are more likely to demonstrate genuine understanding because behaviour is intrinsically motivated rather than directed by adult expectation. Observations conducted during structured tasks may instead capture compliance or performance rather than authentic competence.

Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) emphasised the social nature of learning and proposed that development occurs within meaningful interactions. Sociodramatic and collaborative play contexts allow practitioners to observe language development, self-regulation, negotiation skills, and problem-solving in naturalistic situations. Smidt (2015) suggests that play offers a rich context in which children reveal deeper levels of understanding because they are emotionally invested and cognitively engaged.

Engagement is a crucial factor in observational accuracy. The Leuven Scale of Wellbeing and Involvement, developed by Laevers, identifies high involvement as characterised by concentration, persistence, and intrinsic motivation. When children are deeply engaged in play, behaviour is more sustained and reflective of developmental stage. In contrast, low levels of engagement may result in limited demonstration of ability, leading to potential underestimation of competence. Therefore, play contexts that promote high involvement enhance the reliability of assessment.

Welsh early years policy reinforces the importance of embedded, formative assessment. The Welsh Government (2022) advocates assessment approaches integrated within everyday learning experiences rather than detached testing. Observing children during meaningful play aligns with this philosophy, as it minimises disruption and respects children's rights to developmentally appropriate learning experiences. Furthermore, the United Nations (1989) recognises play as a fundamental right, suggesting that assessment should not compromise children's opportunity to engage freely in play.

However, while play enhances authenticity, it also presents challenges. If practitioners intervene excessively during play, they may inadvertently scaffold performance, resulting in an overestimation of independent ability. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development highlights that adult support can extend learning; yet during assessment, practitioners must carefully distinguish between supported and independent competence. Conversely, minimal adult interaction may prevent children from demonstrating skills that require slight prompting. Skilled professional judgement is therefore essential.

The relational environment also affects observational accuracy. Dowling (2014) emphasises that emotional security underpins confident exploration. Children who feel safe and valued are more likely to take risks and demonstrate emerging skills. In contrast, anxiety or unfamiliarity may restrict participation, thereby influencing observational outcomes. Practitioners must therefore consider emotional context when interpreting behaviour.

Play-based observation additionally supports inclusive practice. Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton (2013) argue that inclusive assessment requires sensitivity to children's diverse cultural and social experiences. During play, children often draw upon their home environments, interests, and identities. Observing these authentic expressions enables practitioners to recognise strengths that may not emerge in formalised tasks. However, cultural differences in play themes or communication styles must be interpreted thoughtfully to avoid biased conclusions.

From a reflective perspective as both a practitioner and parent, I have observed that children's engagement increases when play feels freely chosen rather than assessed. During imaginative play, children often communicate more spontaneously and take greater creative risks, whereas structured adult-led tasks can create a subtle sense of performance that influences behaviour. This suggests that the child's perception of the activity directly affects the authenticity of what is observed.

However, even play-based observation involves a power dynamic. If children become aware of being closely monitored, engagement may shift, affecting accuracy. Therefore, practitioners must observe sensitively and foster emotionally secure environments, as highlighted by Dowling (2014), to ensure behaviour reflects genuine developmental competence.

Ethical considerations must also guide practice. Confidentiality, informed consent, and accurate documentation are essential components of responsible assessment. Reducing children's complex behaviours to simplified judgements risks labelling or misinterpretation. As Smidt (2015) suggests, observation should inform supportive planning rather than categorisation.

In conclusion, play plays a vital role in ensuring that observation and assessment are authentic, ethical, and developmentally appropriate. Theoretical perspectives from Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1978) highlight the importance of active and social learning contexts, while Welsh Government (2022) policy supports embedded assessment within everyday experiences. High engagement during play enhances observational accuracy, yet practitioner skill remains central in balancing participation and objectivity. Effective early years practice therefore depends not only on observing children, but on understanding how the context of play shapes what is seen, interpreted, and recorded.

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