Children's Play: Theory and Practice

No AI has been used in this assignment.

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1. Two types of play and how these can be supported in practice.

Macdonald (2022, p. 8) suggests that play is crucial for children's development and learning as it allows them to discover, explore and make sense of the world, build confidence, develop problem-solving skills and form relationships. This view is supported by theorist Tina Bruce, who highlights the importance of free flow play and how it lets children reflect on their past experiences and use them to improve their skills, boost their confidence and help them develop better control over their actions (King and Sturrock, 2020, p. 29). Bruce (2020) explains that play is a natural, child-led activity that allows children to explore, imagine and learn without any rules. Bruce identifies ‘12 Features of Play’ and through this shows how play promotes creativity, confidence and independence, and notes that play supports children’s emotional well-being and prepares them for future challenges.

According to Institute of Early Years Education (2024), for children to learn most effectively they must be interested and focused on what they are doing, and they can do this through various types of play. Play Wales (2023) describes deep play, sometimes known as risky play, as a type of play that allows children to take risks and face challenging experiences that could potentially be dangerous, such as climbing high trees or jumping off a wall. Deep play is possibly the trickiest type of play for practitioners, as it goes against their instinct and duty to keep children safe. Rees-Edwards (2022) explains that deep play helps children explore their physical and mental abilities whilst learning to manage risks and overcome their fears. Yalçın and Tantekin Erden (2018) suggests that risky play is crucial for healthy development, as well as being essential for a child to reach their “zone of proximal development.” This is because risky play allows children to gradually boost the amount of difficulty that they face, at their own pace. Deep play aligns with Vygotsky’s theory of “the zone of proximal development”, which represents the space between what a child is capable of by themselves and what they are able to accomplish with help from practitioners, or whilst working alongside other children (Billings and Walqui, 2017). Brodie (2024) discusses Mildred Parten Newhall’s six stages of play, which shows how children from birth to five develop their social skills. Deep play can be linked to both stage five (associative play) and stage six

(cooperative play), as they involve social interactions where children start taking on more risky challenges, either alone or with others, which allow them to challenge themselves and build confidence.

Spivey (2023) talks about imaginative play and explains that this type of play involves pretending and role playing. This could look like playing with dolls or pretending to work in a shop. Imaginative play helps children express their emotions and be independent, as well as supporting practitioners in understanding how children see and interpret the world. Ellis (2025) notes that imaginative play is beneficial for children as it allows them to be creative, enhance their physical skills and encourages their language and social development. According to Plocha (2007) imaginative play is linked to “the second stage of Piaget’s cognitive development theory”, as children begin developing “symbolic thinking” around the age of two, which then decreases after age five. Imaginative play can be closely linked to other types of play, such as creative play, which involves creating things through art or stories, and weapon play, which involves children using their imagination to create scenarios, characters, and fights (Scott-McKie and Casey, no date).

Queen Margaret University (2023) describes play as a powerful tool and advises practitioners to provide children with open-ended resources that allow for imaginative play, which will support their holistic development and encourage meaningful learning. They also state that a holistic approach to development is important because it helps children grow in all ways, such as their body, mind and emotions, rather than just focusing on one at a time. A holistic approach makes children healthier, more confident and ready for life’s challenges. National Literacy Trust (2024) explains that play is important as it supports children’s language skills, encourages problem solving, and develops motor skills. It also builds friendships, boosts confidence, and encourages curiosity and creativity.

Welsh Government (2024) advises that practitioners can support children’s play by creating effective environments that are welcoming, encourage curiosity, and support emotional and physical development. They should offer engaging experiences that promote learning through hands-on activities, encouraging creativity and independence. Lastly, by being an enabling adult, practitioners can create safe, supportive environments that encourage holistic development whilst guiding children

and encouraging them to explore. If children are deprived of play during early childhood development, they may experience lifelong effects including, “isolation, depression, reduced self-control and poor resilience” (Play Scotland, 2018).

2. Why children choosing their own play is important and why the role of the adult is significant in children’s play.

According to Family Lives (2025), it is vital that children have the opportunity to choose their own play as it supports their learning and development. It boosts their self-esteem by helping them recognise what they are good at and makes them feel confident. Additionally, because play is an enjoyable experience, children become deeply engaged in it. This aligns with Froebel’s theory, as Smedley and Hoskins (2018) highlight Froebel's belief that children’s learning, well-being, and growth can be nurtured through self-directed play, which has been chosen by the child. Practitioners who understand that learning experiences are holistic can then better support children during their play. Tovey (2020) further explains that Froebel saw play as essential for helping children understand themselves and others, encourage creative and deep thinking, build focus and teach social skills. Froebel viewed play as a powerful tool for children to learn and develop important life skills.

Aminpour, Bishop and Corkery (2020) discuss self-directed play and describe it as a type of play where children independently choose their activities and make their own rules based on their interests. It helps children develop problem-solving skills, lets them enjoy discovering things on their own and allows them to learn without worrying about failing. Self-directed play can include physical, cognitive and social play, such as, playing tag, building a house or role playing with others. This play supports children’s creativity, social skills and independence. Ledendecker (2020) states that by allowing children to explore independently helps them recognise they are capable of doing many things on their own, therefore increasing their confidence. Another benefit to self-directed play is that it encourages “internal motivation” in children, as they can fully enjoy their play without an adult explaining what the outcome should be. Children’s Commissioner for Wales (no date) mentions that in 2011, Wales made the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) part of its law. Article 31 of the UNCRC states that “children have the right to rest, relax and play”.

This shows how important play is for children, and because it was made a legal right, shows that Wales understands that play is more than just fun, but that it is necessary for children's development and growth.

However, Hirsh-Pasek, Winthrop, and Shah (2024) states that many adults fail to understand and see the value and benefit play has for children. An international study found that 78% of children feel adults do not consider their play important, and 73% of children believe adults do not understand the role play has in helping them grow and develop. The Open University (no date) notes that Vygotsky believed adults are essential in children's play through scaffolding. This means adults help children by guiding them through activities they cannot do alone and gradually reduce the support as the child learns. If adults do not see the value of play, they miss the chance to provide important support which then limits children's growth and learning.

Andrews (2017) talks about the vital role adults have when it comes to children's play. He notes that adults should make sure children have the right conditions to enjoy their play and succeed in it. They can do this by creating safe, engaging, and stimulating environments where children can thrive. Joining in with children's play and understanding when to step in or give space to allow for independence is also a vital part of the adult's role. By promoting meaningful play and having safe yet challenging areas, adults ensure that children can explore, develop skills and play freely, whilst also knowing that adult support is always available if needed. Rymanowicz (2015) suggests that adults can support a child's learning by talking to them about the activity they are doing, which shows the child that the adult values their play. Adults can also help by encouraging children to confidently join and explore new activities in the environment. Andrews (2017) suggests that for adults to effectively support children's play, they must let go of their control, follow the child's lead and offer help when asked or needed.

Swansea University (2023) discusses the play cycle, which begins when a child starts playing. The child chooses something to play with, such as loose parts, and then explores and experiments with it, learning along the way. They may repeat or change the play as they go. It is important that adults avoid adulteration at this stage, meaning they should not get too involved or change the play in a way that stops the

child's creativity. This is because lots of adult involvement can limit the child's creativity, independent thinking, and their ability to learn through exploring.

3. A method of observation that can be used in the early years.

Observations are a simple way to gather information and involve carefully watching and listening, then recording findings and using the information to make informed decisions (Intrac, 2017). According to West Sussex County Council (2021) observation is a crucial part for practitioners working with children. It helps adults understand and see children's individual needs by watching, listening, and taking notes. This is especially important in group settings because it ensures that each child receives the right support. Without observations, practitioners would end up planning activities based on what they thought was important or fun, which may not meet the actual needs of the children. Observations can be planned or spontaneous and help monitor a child's development, skills, and interests. By observing often, practitioners can assess progress, understand what children enjoy or struggle with, and plan activities that support their learning and development. Using observations is vital in an early year setting as it ensures that the whole child and their needs come first.

Care Learning (2024) discusses a method of observation that can be used in the early years, called a time sample. This type of observation is used to monitor a child's behaviour at set times, this then provides practitioners with a snapshot of the child's actions over time. The practitioner will plan certain times to watch what the child is doing and will then record their actions. For example, a practitioner may monitor a child every ten minutes throughout a session to see how engaged they are. An advantage of time sampling is that it is useful for tracking children's repetitive behaviours and identifying any patterns linking to it. This makes it beneficial for practitioners as they can observe routines or monitor development progress. Similarly, Sharman, Cross and Vennis (2015) support this view, and add that time sampling is beneficial because it provides a clear and organised way to monitor behaviour. It also helps practitioners focus on key areas like following instructions and social interactions without the need for constant notetaking. In a busy setting, this method ensures that important behaviours are recorded fairly and allows any

patterns to be easily recognised and assessed. Peterson and Elam (2020) state that it can be beneficial as this type of observation does not require practitioners to have training on it before use, therefore making it fast and simple to use. Tapestry (2025) suggests that observations are valuable as they give practitioners a holistic view of children, as they help to identify areas where they need extra support and areas where they are thriving. Ledendecker (2023) notes that Montessori's theory encourages practitioners to observe children in a calm and non-judgmental way, which then helps them understand each child's individual development. Time sampling supports Montessori's method, as it allows practitioners to focus on watching the child instead of stepping in immediately, and it provides practitioners with a clear understanding of the child's interests, behaviours, and progress.

However, Care Learning (2024) suggests that even though recording a child's behaviour at specific times can helps spot patterns, it may also miss out certain behaviours that happen in between, because it is not within the set time chosen by the practitioner. This aligns with Special Connections (no date) which states that a disadvantage of this type of observation is the risk of being wrong about a child's behaviour. This is because a child may show a certain type of behaviour just before or after the observation takes place, therefore missing the time sample and possibly leading to incorrect information. Complex Needs (no date) also supports this view, and notes that time sampling records how often a behaviour is happening, but not why it is happening or what is going on around it. This lack of context could lead to inaccurate observations. Peterson and Elam (2020) also mention that time sampling does not show the exact order of events for any behaviour observed, which means the findings could be misleading. The Open University (no date) notes the 'Hawthorne Effect' which describes when a child may change their behaviour when they are aware of someone watching them. This could make it difficult to observe a true reflection of their normal behaviour. Factors such as tiredness, illness or anxiety can also influence how a child acts, which may affect the observation. Additionally, the practitioner's reliability is also a concern, as personal bias, level of skills and different interpretations can make observations less accurate and less objective.

4. Why the role of play is important when observing and assessing children.

According to Care Learning (2025), observing children whilst they are playing is beneficial for practitioners, as they can find out important information. Because every child is different, with their own interests, strengths and challenges, observing them whilst they play allows practitioners to spot patterns in their behaviour, see the child's true self and learn their likes or dislikes. For example, some children may enjoy physical play, such as climbing or running, whereas others may enjoy quieter activities, such as drawing or jigsaw puzzles. Practitioners can gently support children by observing them and their behaviour, such as, if a child seems withdrawn, a practitioner can comfort them or suggest an activity that the child enjoys. Using observations regularly helps practitioners change the play and learning environment, keeping it fun, fresh and inclusive for children of all abilities. This ensures that activities remain engaging, meet every child's needs, and create a supportive space where all children can thrive.

Howard and McInnes (2012) suggest that children are happier if they see an activity as play rather than a task, and through observations, found that play is also linked to more positive behaviour. This gives practitioners a more accurate reflection of children, as they are more likely to show their natural behaviours, emotions and interests, which leads to more genuine observations. It also emphasises how play contributes to children's development and learning and shows why practitioners should have training to see and value play from a child's perspective. This then allows practitioners to create supportive and engaging environments for children. Besio, Bulgarelli and Stancheva-Popkostadinova (2018) advise that observations should be done in a familiar environment for the child, during their play, and should focus on activities chosen by the child rather than led by practitioners. Tinney (2023) notes that observations during play are important as practitioners can use them to develop children's learning opportunities in the environment, which supports their holistic development.

Care Learning (2025) states that practitioners use observations to understand all areas of children's development by noticing how they play at different ages. For example, younger children may enjoy sensory play, and older children may prefer structured games or creative activities. In early years, practitioners can observe

children through different types of play, such as, imaginative or physical. This then allows practitioners to see what play the children enjoy and understand the different skills developing within them. These observations also help identify any developmental concerns, which practitioners can then share with parents or professionals if needed. Care Learning (2025) also highlights that practitioners can build stronger connections with children through observations, by being interested in their chosen play. For example, if a practitioner notices that a child enjoys dinosaurs, they might offer a dinosaur book or a toy to further support and encourage this interest.

Observing children during play is supported by Froebel, as Louis (2022) suggests that Froebel used observations of children's play to understand their development and learning. He encouraged practitioners and parents to watch how children learn independently through their actions, senses, interests, and experiences. Froebel believed that learning is all connected and that children learn by making links between subjects like math, art or nature. To better understand a child's development and behaviour, observations should take place in different environments, both indoors and outdoors. Additionally, Froebel believed children should not be judged based on one observation, this is because their behaviour and learning may differ between different scenarios or situations.

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