

Section 1

What Is Play?

Play is childhood's universal language. Children learn to understand one another and the world around them through play (Play Scotland, 2023).

Sensory Play

Action for Children (2022) states, any activity that piques the senses such as tactile, visual, auditory, olfactory, and taste is considered sensory play. Both Piaget and Montessori believed young children acquire their knowledge through their surroundings, with their immediate environment serving as a catalyst for interaction and understanding of the world around them (Piaget, 1936 and Montessori, 1912 cited in Aubrey and Riley 2019).

Piaget believed an essential part of a child's learning and development is sensory play. In his theory (Piaget, 1936 cited by Kable, 2022) he states, the capacity to remember information through the senses plays a role in learning. Play that allows children to experiment with different materials, textures, sounds, smells, and visual stimuli can go beyond the typical bounds of structured activities and take on an endless exploration journey.

Hwb (no date) and Palumbo (2023) both agree that in the context of early childhood development, sensory play encourages inclusive, unstructured play that develops critical development, encourages self-control, ignites curiosity, sharpens problem-solving skills, and fosters creativity.

Role Play

Role play is a creative activity children engage in to act out concepts, ideas, and stories so they can make sense of the world around them. According to Huleatt (2018), Einstein once said, 'imagination embraces the entire world, whereas knowledge is limited.'

Imagination is at the centre of children's role play. A child with a good imagination can re-enact or act out a concept with space and props. According to Brown (2022), props can be helpful, so children, particularly younger children, can think of ideas to play out with their peers.

Children engaging in role play, often adopt various personas or pretend to be different people in imaginary or real-life situations such as a police officer, a fairy living in a castle or a parent. The ideas are endless. In his Social Learning Theory, Bandura, (1977) cited in MacBlain (2022) believed that children learn from imitating and observing others. Role play focuses on taking on specific roles and bringing them to life with the help of creativity and imagination. Welsh Government (2014) state, every child should have the chance to freely engage in role play and dressing up.

Gaffo (2023), believes that through role play, children can hone their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities while also learning how to analyse and make decisions based on their immediate surroundings. Additionally, Brown (2022), explains that role-playing can also help with social skills. Children can experiment with various social dynamics and ways of interacting with others by taking on different roles. Children collaborate to create and act out scenarios in this type of play, which promotes sharing, cooperation, and taking turns. Similarly, Sophia (2023), believes children can act out various scenarios and adopt other children's perspectives through roleplaying, which can aid in the development of their empathy and understanding of other people. By placing themselves in other people's shoes, children can develop new perspectives and an understanding of the emotions and thoughts of others. Furthermore, this fosters moral growth and develops their socialisation.

Role play supports language development and can help children adopt new vocabulary. Vygotsky (1978), cited in MacBlain (2022), believed that the use of language through talking and listening, is enough to influence children's perception on how they understand the world around them.

When children are engaged in role play they will tend to use language that they would not necessarily use every day. For example, if they are role playing a fire officer, they may use specific language like hose or gushing water, blazing fires. Another example is if the child is role playing being a parent, they may use language such as cooking, ingredients, or milk pan. This is language that they would have had modelled at some point and are now mimicking this language in their role play. This will help develop vocabulary and conversational skills with their peers.

It is clear from the two play styles that they correspond with distinct phases of cognitive development. In studying Piaget's theory of cognitive development, role play corresponds with the later preoperational and concrete operational stages, while sensory play corresponds with the early sensorimotor stage and later stages. According to Bruner, (1966) cited in Pound (2006) the sensorimotor stage is the enactive stage of cognitive development, whereas role play be the symbolic mode of cognitive development. This is because the enactive mode is based around children using their senses to make sense of the world around them, and role play is symbolic as children have an awareness and can represent a range of experiences. In the sense of emotional regulation, both forms of play promote emotional development. In addition to helping children express themselves, role play allows a deeper understanding of others' emotions through critical thinking, empathy, and problem solving in various contexts. On the other hand, through a range of stimuli, children can channel their emotions through sensory play, adopting a safe space to channel any negative feelings. This also helps children with emotional regulation. According to Action for Children (2022), the capacity to remember information through our senses plays a major role in learning this is because sensory play fosters the growth of social, communication, and language skills. Through the use of objects and their attributes, which can be adjectives to describe how the sensory activity appears to the individual, language skills are developed during sensory play. Moreover, this might initiate discussions amongst peers. According to Piaget, (1970) cited in MacBlain (2022), children engaging in role play appear to have an increasing understanding of language, and therefore are using words and symbols to represent objects or people, however, children in the egocentrism stage often cannot see the world from the perspective of others. Both forms of play are important to help children grow within their developmental stages and can help them advance into the next phases of cognitive development by challenging them and providing additional scaffolding activities on the learning they have already mastered.

Section 2

Play is a part of a child's education in which they may not see as 'work'. It is a time where children can freely explore their surroundings and express their emotions. Through play, children can learn about the world around them and can support cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being. According to Stipek, (1993) cited by D'souza (2021), Children need time for free play to freely investigate the social, emotional, and objective world. Playing with other children helps to develop social skills and emotional self-regulation.

Children should be encouraged to take charge of their education through self-directed play. In a secure, encouraging setting, children can freely explore their interests, ideas, and learn new skills. According to Lendendecker (2020), the role of self-directed play is to allow children to initiate learning based on their own interests to enable self-directed activity and discovery, therefore developing creativity and being hands on in their learning journey.

According to research (Dereli İman *et al.*, 2017), Montessori, promoted self-directed play, in the theory, the Montessori method (1912). This study discovered that young children's emotional regulation is supported as they seek autonomy with self-directed play. Testing out ideas, making mistakes, self-correction and learning from exploration are all permitted. Self-discipline makes it possible to develop responsibilities, and in turn develops socially and emotionally competent children through self-directed play. Similarly, Te Whāriki curriculum is based on the pedagogical principle of learning through play. Ministry of Education (2018) suggests that the program implements a successful learning through play system that enables children to engage in self-directed play that is intrinsically motivated. Furthermore, encouraging deeper thinking and inter- personal skills, to develop 'confident, connected, lifelong learners.'

It is the responsibility of the adult to allow children opportunities for play, whether it be directed or self-directed play. These opportunities could involve both indoor and outdoor activities and should take the interests of the children into consideration. Lowri (2016), believes this will ignite their motivation to learn. Thus, allowing for greater holistic development because it can instil a deeper curiosity, allowing further creativity and communication development.

PACEY (2023) points out that it is the adult's responsibility to make sure that the environment allows children to get the most out of self-directed play. In addition to the indoor and outdoor physical environments, the learning environment should also support emotional development. Children's interests should be incorporated into the physical learning environment, which should also be stimulating, demanding, and well-resourced. where children's needs and interests are met by the continuously available provision, fostering their growth, learning, and development in a deliberately planned and thought-out learning environment.

Early Years Matters (2021b) claim, children play naturally and spontaneously, though some might require additional assistance from adults. This may be needed if a problem arises, and the children are not able to negotiate or solve the problem amongst themselves. Play occurs both inside and outside, and it is in these diverse environments that children explore and learn about their immediate surroundings. Here, they put new concepts and abilities into practice, take chances, use creativity, and work alone or in groups to solve problems. Adults should support this by providing resources, time, and appropriate space. Things that will encourage play and pique children's imaginations include clothing, boxes, treasure baskets, jewellery, cardboard tubes, and old upholstery and fabric. The adult should watch and listen, and only join in play when invited.

To support or scaffold learning and allow a child to develop, PACEY (2021) contends that adult intervention is required during play. Furthermore, you must be aware of the child's prior knowledge to build on when using scaffolding techniques. Although it frequently takes the form of a conversation between an adult and child, scaffolding can also be defined as an adult realising that adding new resources can improve an area or activity, and after careful planning and observation can further support learning.

Additionally, McInnes *et al.* (2013) suggests that this has consequences for learning because, children practice tasks more effectively for learning when they do so in a playful setting with an adult nearby rather than in a formal setting with an adult present. Adults must make sure that children have fewer opportunities to develop the cue of adult presence as a defining feature of play in a setting to maximize the potential for play in the classroom.

Section 3

Observation is a tool in which we pay attention to children and to their behaviour to see what we can learn about their development, interests, and lessons learned from play and experiences. According to Early Years Matters (2021a), it is the role of the adults to exchange knowledge to determine whether a child is developing at the expected rate, whether toys and other equipment are age-appropriate, and to concentrate on future provision that will help the child explore new interests, pick up new skills, and learn new information.

According to Froebel (Louis, 2022), observations play an important part in educating adults about the knowledge that children possess. Our goal and direction, along with our knowledge and understanding of how children learn and develop, all have an impact on the ability of our interpretations. The support for a child should be determined by what we observe them needing for their continued learning and development. It is also important to realise that each child is unique and what works for one may not work for another.

Investigating the Leuven scale, an observational method that dates to the 1980s and was developed by Dr. Ferre Laevers. It is evident that the child's well-being and degree of engagement in the selected activity were both significant considerations. The Leuven scale measures involvement and wellbeing on a 5-point scale, with 1 being 'Extremely Low and 5 Extremely high' on the scale. MacRae and Jones (2020) claim that a child's development will likely be compromised if there is a lack of involvement and/or wellbeing. We can contribute more to a child's development the more wellbeing and involvement we can raise for them. Deep level learning is evident when there are high levels of wellbeing and involvement. The Leuven Scale's observational basis and emphasis on the child's self-directed learning, with a focus on emotional wellbeing are the main benefits. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that observation and observation-based learning are the most successful approaches to teaching early childhood development. According to Learning Journals (2021), The Leuven Scale ensures that the approach avoids becoming a "one size fits all" pedagogical method that can be applied to every child by focusing on the child and their mental, social, and emotional wellbeing. It creates practitioners who are versatile and responsive to the needs of a child. Additionally, whilst it works

well for neurotypical children it does not consider for neurodiversity or children with additional or special educational needs nor does it allow for culture behavioural differences.

The Leuven scale focuses on well-being and involvement. It seems that the thought behind this theory is if a child is not happy in himself, nor is engaged in the type of play that is prepared then the level of deep learning is not going to take place. So, in, in turn will have a negative effect on their holistic development. GESS Education (n.d) agree that a child with poor well-being is unable to participate as fully in their education, and a child with average well-being can only ever be one who lacks motivation and focus.

Section 4

Play is an essential element of observation and assessment. This is so that the adult or practitioner can get the knowledge necessary to help the children further by watching them play. Through careful observation and assessment, an adult can ascertain the knowledge, skills, and abilities that children currently possess while they play, and subsequently, what additional support is needed to enhance their learning and development. Neaum (2016) points out that as with all other aspects of observation, practitioners must learn about the preferences of specific children and make sure that the resources are tailored to the children's preferred methods of learning.

Louis (2018) maintains that adults can gain a more comprehensive understanding of a child's development and a better understanding of their strengths and areas needing development by watching children at play. It enables the adult to observe how the child is accumulating knowledge and understanding their surroundings. Instead of participating in structured activities, children learn naturally through play and feel more comfortable pursuing interests. This will probably help children feel more at ease and when expressing any social or problem-solving skills and advance their cognitive development. However, there are times when child's play can be hindered if there is lack of adult support. An example of this is if a child is struggling with social skills and finds it difficult to share, in this case an adult can step in to offer support. The adult having the skills to acknowledge the need to step in to support the child's development or play is a skill that comes with experience. Early Years Matters (2009) agree on one hand, learning may be hampered by inadequate adult support.

While play without adults can be rich and fulfilling, it can also occasionally devolve into repetitive or unwanted behaviour. On the other hand, children who are overly occupied with structured activities or in the presence of adults miss out on the chance to actively participate in their education. Skilled Childhood practitioners will arrange the daily schedule's time, location, and activities to best support the overall development and learning of the children. With effective observational skills the adult will know if a child is needing support or if they can resolve an issue themselves. It is always good practise for the adult to know the children in their care particularly well, this way the adult will know how they can support that child or scaffold learning. Observing children during play and evaluating their interpersonal skills will enable the observer to know if the child has learned the skills to respond effectively, appropriately, and confidently to a situation. It is down to the adult's experience to reflect on whether they are needed during the play to support the child or if it would prevent the child from developing the skills needed.

Through careful observations, the practitioner can set up enabling environments by knowing the interests, like and dislikes of the children. The environment will ignite curiosity and motivation to learn and explore freely, enabling children to develop holistically. PACEY (2018) claims that the development and learning of children are greatly aided by an enabling environment. It is commonly known that children learn and grow most effectively in nurturing, accommodating settings that cater to their specific needs while letting them play and explore. Similarly, birth to 5 Matters (n.d) state, children who are in an enabling environment make the decision to play and decide for themselves what to play, how long to play, what to do, and what to use. Their capacity to take initiative and make decisions gives them a sense of autonomy and helps them grow in confidence in their own agency.

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