

## Section 1

Play is considered to be the 'work' of children. The word 'play' can mean different things to different children and is unique to the individual, but it consists of a range of activities undertaken for personal enjoyment and pleasure. Play should be spontaneous and intrinsically motivated with no required outcome. Children should feel in control of their play to enable them to explore their own ideas and interests and follow their own instincts. Play can be solitary or social (Play Cubed, 2019). Play is crucial for a child's learning and development. It covers a wide range of both intellectual and physical growth. Physical, emotional, cognitive, social and moral skills are developed through play (Health of Children, no date).

Children and adults learn best when they want to do something, rather than being made to complete a certain task. Therefore, children are more attracted to play opportunities and are able to concentrate for a longer period of time when it is self-directed. Play is important as it allows adults to observe children "at their highest level of competence", giving the adults insight to the child's ideas, interests and development but also highlights any areas for concern (Pound, 2005). Juster (2015) describes self-directed play as being freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. Self-directed play is when a child is able to independently choose the content and intent of their play with no adult interference. When children are given the opportunities and time to self-direct their own play, they learn to work things out for themselves by practicing necessary skills to overcome obstacles. It allows them to make sense of the world around them and encourages creative problem solving. By having control over their play children learn how to take healthy risks therefore promoting self-confidence and competence. Self esteem is boosted when children are able to explore their own ideas without the fear of failure or being 'wrong'. The positive skills and outcomes reached throughout self-directed play enhances the development of the whole child and therefore contributes to their success at school.

There are many types of play. A few types of play are, Symbolic Play, Socio-dramatic Play, Risky Play and Role Play. All play types involve a range of skills that will aid the child's development. Sociodramatic play is when imaginative play is shared with others. The play can use imagination only or it could include the use of props,

costumes and scenery. Sociodramatic play allows children to stretch their imagination and explore endless possibilities. As the children act out conversations, take on characters, recreate stories and scripts; this can have a powerful impact on their language development. Social skills are also developed through interacting with each other. Skills such as problem solving with peers, sharing, taking turns and negotiating with each other are also benefits of sociodramatic play (Victoria State Government, 2019). All play types are important contributors to a child's holistic wellness. Through sociodramatic play, children are exposed to social and interpersonal skill building. Learning to resolve conflicts with peers in a positive way can help with resilience and are building blocks for their emotional intelligence. Sociodramatic play develops their creativity and imagination along side opportunities to enhance their communication skills. It is through these play experiences that children start to develop friendships and strong relationships. A sense of belonging and feeling connected will have a positive impact on their confidence and self esteem (First Walkers, 2016).

McInnes et al. (2013) state that children are more likely to see an activity as play if an adult was not near or directly involved. Although Loizou (2017) expresses the dilemma in the understanding of whether practitioners should be involved in a child's play or not, while highlighting that early year's practitioners should have a "comprehensive and sophisticated understanding of play". Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2004), report that the most effective settings equally used a balance of child directed activities and adult directed activities. Although, the adults would skilfully extend self-directed play with adult interactions of 'sustained shared thinking' to extend and support their learning.

The role of the adult when learning through play is crucial. When observing children during play, the adult becomes aware of the child's learning and by using these observations adults can extend their learning with appropriate and challenging resources based on the interests of the children. Providing a safe learning environment will allow the children to thrive whilst learning through play. Allowing the children long enough periods of time in order for them to be able to engage in their choice of play can promote longer concentration spans, creativity and independence. The adult needs to know when to engage with children in their play to encourage the development of communication but also recognise when to step back to allow the children to develop their own play independently (Caro, 2012; Bruce, 2011).

## Section 2

The word 'risk' is to potentially be exposed to hazards or danger (Merriam-Webster, 2020). There is an element of risk in any human activity. Considering the likelihood of potential harm, the severity of the harm and the benefits and outcomes of the activity are three factors to determine whether the risk is tolerable or acceptable. Risk assessments are put in place and used as judgements of the level of potential harm; based on the balance of risk and benefits of the activity. Although almost every environment contains the possibility of risk or harm; schools are controlled environments therefore it is the responsibility of the adults to ensure risks are managed accordingly and effectively (Free Play Network, no date). Thomas and Harding (2011) explains why it is important for children to be exposed to risky play and when given the opportunities and supported in doing so, children are encouraged to self-manage their own behaviour, challenge themselves by setting and testing their own boundaries, whilst gaining a better understanding on how to risk assess independently. In return children feel trusted, which can promote their confidence in their own abilities.

The importance of risk in play has been well documented through various pioneers. McMillan stated that a child's play should be brave and adventurous and take place in 'a proactive environment'. Froebel argued that adults should focus more on the benefits of an activity rather than the potential risks involved. Froebel also believed that children who were exposed to more risky play were safer and more resilient than those children who were not as experienced or has been protected from risk (Maynard and Waters, 2014).

Broadland, Howard and Wood (2010) report that children who are confident in their play 'become lifelong learners who are capable of independent, abstract thought and who feel able to take risks in order to solve problems and gain understanding'. This statement corresponds with the new curriculum for Wales as one of the four core purposes. Currently, The Foundation Phase Framework for Wales is designed for children to learn through 'play'. Through their play children have the opportunities to

experiment and take risks to become 'confident explorers of their indoor and outdoor environment' (Welsh Government, 2015).

It is the adult's responsibilities to assess and manage the level of risk when supervising children at play. Children should be given the chance extend their knowledge and test their own abilities without being exposed to 'unacceptable risk'. All children are exposed to minor injuries such as bruises and grazes during childhood and whilst these incidents can be upsetting to those involved it can also impose a positive impact on the children by allowing the children to assess consequences to their actions or choices; although children must be protected from serious injuries. Controlled opportunities for children to encounter and manage risk allow children to learn the important skills to assess their competences and learn about risk (Free Play Network, no date). As children have more experience with play that could involve risk, they learn to understand their own limitations and with that they become more aware of what is safe and what is not (Pilcher, no date).

Children who have been less exposed to or protected from risks during play may show less confidence in pushing their own boundaries or trying new things. This is where the adult can observe and encourage children to extend their abilities and feel comfortable in doing so. Adults can model the use of equipment and how to use equipment safely. Areas of the outdoor and indoor classroom should be assessed daily and health and safety policies need to be followed and respected. It is the role of the practitioners to provide safe and age appropriate equipment whilst also ensuring that the environment offers challenges and stimulation. Staying tuned into the interests and needs of the children will give the practitioner a better understanding of what resources and opportunities to provide in order for the children to enhance their skills through worthwhile and meaningful experiences. Practitioners should supervise at all times to ensure the safety of the children but at the same time find a balance to allow them to explore their curiosities independently (Rodgers, 2018).

### Section 3

Assessments made through observations help practitioners understand the development of children; what they can do, what they know and their level of understanding. When observations are analysed, the next steps in their learning journey can be planned for appropriately (Nutbrown, 2005).

The Foundation Phase in Wales is a developmental curriculum for three to seven year olds with the ethos of learning through play. Recognising the importance and vitality of play, the Welsh Government created 'The Foundation Phase Profile' which works within the 'Welsh Governments early Years Development and Assessment Framework' to track and assess children's learning throughout their time in the Foundation Phase. The purpose is to give a holistic view of the children's development and learning as well an early identification of 'possible developmental delay, special educational needs (SEN), or additional learning needs (ALN)' (Welsh Government, 2019).

In order for it to be a manageable assessment the Foundation Phase Profile is designed in two sizes: The Compact Profile and the Full Profile. The Compact Profile includes the four skill ladder for each area of learning and is a less detailed assessment used for baseline, whereas the Full Profile consists of more skill ladders to track the level of skills achieved during and at the end of the Foundation Phase. For more clarity and easy measurements, both profiles produce an 'Outcomes' score (Evans, 2015).

Through discussion and observations during the child's journey through the Foundation Phase reports and outcomes should be attained in the following Four Areas of Learning.

- Personal and Social Development, Well-being and cultural Diversity
- Language, Literacy and Communication Skills in English or Welsh
- Mathematical Development
- Physical Development

The Foundation Phase Outcomes explain the range of skills achieved by each child. Each outcome description is based on a rounded judgement on how the child performs 'across a range of contexts' and is compared to adjacent outcomes to ensure it is the nearest match to the performance of the individual (Welsh Government, 2015).

Continuity of the child's learning journey is promoted in the Foundation Phase Profile as it is suitable for assessing nurseries aged children on entry to the foundation phase. These early assessments can help build a profile of skills, that can be recorded and passed onto reception class teachers, supporting times of transition (Welsh Government, 2017).

The Compact Profile is used as a baseline assessment consisting of 'unobtrusive' observations undertaken in the first six weeks of starting reception class. The skill ladders chosen provide practitioners with key information so that practitioners can fully support their early years development. This observational approach is designed to support the pedagogy of the Foundation Phase and allow practitioners to become familiar about the children's learning styles, interests and developmental stages. The Welsh Government will then receive reports on the outcomes of the Compact Profile (Welsh Government, 2017).

Although the profile is designed to line up with assessments carried out the health service and highlights possible developmental delays or additional learning needs, it does not carry enough detail to fully assess the nature of potential needs or delays. Therefore, further assessments and observations would need to be carried out, which are designed for a specific purpose to ensure the child is receiving the appropriate care and support (Welsh Government, no date).

Every child in the Foundation Phase will be assessed on entry to Reception class during the first six weeks, age has a huge impact on development resulting in the fact that some of the children in the class may have already turned five years old whereas some children may have only just turned four. Children being almost twelve months apart from their peers may show different stages of development, this is one factor that is not accounted for in the Compact Profile but a fact for practitioners to take into account when it comes to expectations.

Many other observation types maybe specific to looking for one or two skills and there maybe strict regulations to how the observation is done and how it is recorded, whereas the Foundation Phase profile has no set method of recording, therefore it is down to the setting to use their own recording mechanisms to collect evidence. This can leave the practitioner with more freedom to develop creative ways to observe. The profile emphasises the ethos of the foundation phase, which is learning through play. The Foundation Phase Profile encourages observations to be undertaken through child led activities, underpinning the extensive research that children perform best when they see the activity as play. Therefore, showing a more accurate view of their learning and development (Welsh Government, 2017).

If any concerns arise of a child in a particular area of learning, there maybe call to use an additional observation method to form an understanding to the practitioner of possible causes for concern. For example, whilst completing the Social Interaction part of the Compact Profile, if a child is showing a particularly low outcome in this area; using professional judgement, the practitioner may wish to carry out a more detailed observation. This observation type would be used alongside the Foundation Phase Profile to develop a better understanding of the reasons for child's outcome, for example this could be an 'Interaction Tracker'. Using more than one observation type can create a better understanding of the whole child.

The Compact Profile assessments are clear and easy to understand making it an accessible document. It gives a vast holistic view of a child's developmental stages. Although the profile promotes a consistent scoring method, the skill and experience of the practitioner is paramount to ensure the correct judgment of each outcome. Definitions and guidance accompany every Outcome statement, giving observational examples of what the child might be seen achieving. Due to the concern of practitioners having varied opinions, this guidance helps to ensure consistency between practitioner's judgements (Evans, 2015).

## Section 4

The term 'to observe' means to 'watch something or someone' or 'look closely' (Collins Dictionary, 2020). Observations of small children should have a clear intention. Such observations can give practitioners important information about the abilities of the children, their interests and development but also provide professionals with reflection of their own practice and areas in which they can improve on, in order for them to provide an effective and supportive provision (Palaiologou, 2008).

Limiting observations to formal, paper based assessments will only give the practitioner 'developmental norms and prescribed criteria' whereas observing children through play gives the practitioner vast amounts of information about the unique child through the richness of their own self-directed play (Neaum, 2016). Play allows children to feel confident and competent, therefore making play an important opportunity for observations. Lev Vygotsky believed "In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Pound, 2006).

Howard and McInnes (2012) report that a 'like play' activity is perceived by children when the child has a choice about participating in an activity, the location of the activity and when an adult was proximal whereas a 'not like play' activity is when an adult is directly present and have asked the child to participate. It has been researched and reported that when children see an activity as not play, their emotional well being is decreased, than when they see an activity as play, where their well being was increased. This an important factor to consider when professionals are assessing and observing children. The findings of this report also highlight children were more engaged when they perceived the activity as play, there fore equipping the observer with a more holistic view of their development.

When practitioners observe children their intentions are to view the full potential of the child and in order to do so professionals need to understand the values of observing through self-directed play. When children feel less pressured to 'get it right' in activity and see it more as play, their performance, accuracy and focus improve (McInnes et al. 2013). An important part of adult/child interactions is the language that is used. The use of open questioning techniques can facilitate language development, based on

shared problem solving using the 'Sustained Shared Thinking' approach (McInnes et al. 2013; Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2004).

Although adult participation during self-directed play can have a positive impact on learning, the adult should use their professional knowledge of when and in what way they should join in. If an adult joins into the play prematurely it can result in the adult taking over and limiting the play opportunity, leaving the child disinterested (Early Years Careers, 2016). The 'Play Cycle' is used by practitioners to gain a better understanding of play. It is used to observe children playing and to know when is the best time to join in, intervene or just stand back and observe. The cycle helps practitioners to reflect on how to gain a full picture of the child's play and how to enhance their learning if the opportunity arises for the adult to do so, without breaking the cycle. The Play Cycle has the following components; play drive, play cue, play return, play flow, play frame, play annihilation and play adulteration. Knowledge of the cycle can allow practitioners to know how to support their play better and observe effectively (Sands, 2013).

Moyles (2010a) highlights the power of play and the important role of educators is to provide rich opportunities for children to engage in play. Observing children in any context of self directed play can give the practitioner insight to a range of skills obtained by the child. when adults tune into children during self directed play 'deep and meaningful learning' can be evidenced.

How children perceive play, will have an influence over their level of performance. When adults understand their role in the child's play, they can begin to plan effectively for how observations and assessments will be carried out and how best to collect a more accurate view of the child's learning and development (McInnes et al. 2011)

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