

Cover sheet.

For this assignment I have used the following: -

Part 1: Types of Play.

Part 2: Importance for children to choose their own play.

Part 3: Understanding of observation.

Part 4: Understanding of the role of play when undertaking observations and assessments of children.

Statement for the use of AI.

I acknowledge the use of Co-pilot between 26.01.26 – 28.02.26 to research and to proofread.

I used the prompt(s):

1. Theorists
2. Observation methods.
3. Proof reading.

Section 1.

Play is widely recognised as central to children's learning and development. Different types of play offer unique opportunities for growth across physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains.

The discussion draws on key theorists including **Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner**, who emphasise the importance of active, social, and scaffolded learning.

Nature Play

Nature play involves children engaging with natural environments and materials such as mud, water, stones, leaves, and outdoor spaces through open-ended exploration. It is sensory rich and encourages curiosity, experimentation, and imaginative thinking. Nature play strongly supports holistic development. (**Lester and Maudsley (2007)**). Physically, it promotes balance, coordination, strength, and fine motor skills as children climb, dig, carry, and manipulate natural materials (**Bento and Dias, 2017**). Cognitively, it encourages problem-solving, prediction and early scientific thinking as children observe natural phenomena and test ideas (**Fjørtoft, 2004**). Socially and emotionally, nature play fosters cooperation, resilience, confidence, and emotional regulation, particularly when children take manageable risks or work together outdoors (**Chawla, 2015**). It also nurtures environmental awareness and a sense of responsibility for the natural world.

The benefits of nature play align closely with the **constructivist theory** of **Piaget, J. (1951)**, which emphasises that children learn through active, hands-on exploration. Nature play provides opportunities for children to assimilate and accommodate new information as they interact with natural materials. The **sociocultural theory** of **Vygotsky, L.S. (1978)** is also evident, as nature play often involves collaboration and shared problem-solving, enabling children to learn within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) through adult or peer scaffolding. **Bruner, J. (1966) spiral curriculum** can be seen in the way children revisit natural materials and concepts repeatedly, deepening their understanding over time and building increasingly complex knowledge structures.

Nature play can be observed across **Parten's (1932) stages of play**. Younger children may engage in solitary or parallel play, exploring materials independently or

alongside others. As social skills develop, they progress to associative and cooperative play, for example when building dens or working together in a mud kitchen. These collaborative experiences strengthen communication, shared thinking, and early teamwork skills.

Practitioners can support nature play by providing access to varied outdoor environments, offering loose natural materials, modelling curiosity, and encouraging safe risk-taking. Linking nature play to EYFS areas such as Understanding the World and Physical Development strengthens its role in holistic learning (DfE, 2024). Allowing extended periods outdoors also supports deeper engagement and sustained shared thinking, which is essential for cognitive and language development.

Block Play

Block play involves children using wooden blocks, hollow blocks, or other construction materials to build, experiment and represent ideas. It is a versatile form of play that supports multiple areas of development. According to **Hansel (2015)**, *“physically block play strengthens fine motor control, spatial awareness, and hand–eye coordination”*. According to **Clements and Sarama (2009)**, *“cognitively it supports early mathematical thinking, including concepts of shape, balance, symmetry, measurement and classification”*. Block play also promotes symbolic representation, a key aspect of Piaget’s preoperational stage, as children use blocks to represent objects, ideas, or narratives.

Ness and Farenga (2007), believe that *“socially, block play encourages communication, negotiation, and collaborative problem-solving, particularly when children work together on large structures Emotionally, it builds perseverance and resilience as children test ideas, cope with structures falling and refine their constructions. These experiences support self-regulation, confidence, and a willingness to take risks in learning.”*

Block play aligns strongly with major theorists. **Piaget, J. (1951)** viewed block play as *“supporting logical and spatial reasoning, enabling children to move from intuitive to more structured thinking”*. **Vygotsky, L.S. (1978)** emphasised the importance of social interaction and language in learning: *“block play provides opportunities for*

children to construct knowledge through dialogue, shared planning and adult scaffolding". Bruner, J. (1966) highlighted "the role of representation in learning; block play allows children to move between enactive (hands-on), iconic (visual) and symbolic (abstract) modes of thinking, supporting deeper conceptual understanding and problem-solving".

Block play also reflects **Parten, M. (1932) stages of play**. Children may begin with solitary play, then building independently, before progressing to parallel play where they construct side-by-side. As skills develop, they engage in associative and cooperative play, collaborating on complex structures, negotiating roles, and solving problems together. These social interactions strengthen communication and teamwork skills.

Practitioners can support block play by providing a range of block types, offering space for large-scale construction, introducing mathematical vocabulary, and encouraging children to plan and reflect on their designs. Block play links closely to EYFS Mathematics, Communication and Language, together with Expressive Arts and Design (**DfE, 2024**), making it a valuable tool for integrated learning.

Section 2.

The Importance of Self-directed Play and the Role of the Adult in Early Childhood Education

Self-directed play is a principal component of early childhood development, supporting autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and holistic learning. This essay explores what self-directed play is, why it is important for children to choose their own play and the crucial role adults provide by enabling and supporting it.

Self-directed play refers to play that is initiated, controlled, and sustained by the child rather than directed by an adult. Children choose the activity, set the rules, and regulate the pace and duration of their involvement. This aligns with constructivist theories of learning. **Piaget (1962)** argued that *“children construct knowledge through active exploration, making self-initiated play a natural context for cognitive development”*. **Vygotsky (1978)** similarly emphasised that *“play enables children to operate within their zone of proximal development by experimenting with roles, ideas and problem-solving strategies. Through self-directed play, children act as active agents who make sense of their world through meaningful, self-chosen experiences.”*

How Adults Support Self-directed Play

Although self-directed play is child led, adults play a vital role in creating the conditions that allow it to flourish. One key responsibility is providing an enabling environment rich in open-ended materials such as blocks, loose parts, natural objects, or art resources. These encourage exploration and creativity without prescribing outcomes. This emphasis on the environment aligns with **Bronfenbrenner’s (1979)** ecological systems theory, which highlights the significance of the microsystem in shaping children’s experiences; the resources, routines and interactions provided by adults directly influence the quality of children’s play. **Wood (2014)** argues that *“flexible environments promote deeper engagement and allow children to take initiative in their learning.”*

Adults must also ensure children have sufficient time and space for uninterrupted play, enabling deep involvement essential for creativity and sustained concentration. Observation is another crucial aspect of the adult’s role. By watching before intervening, adults can understand children’s intentions and offer sensitive,

nonintrusive support. **Siraj Blatchford et al. (2002)** describes this as *“sustained shared thinking, where adults extend children’s ideas through conversation or questioning without taking over. Adults also support social and emotional development by helping children negotiate conflicts, express feelings, and develop empathy while ensuring the play remains child led.”*

Why Self-directed Play Is Important

Self-directed play supports children’s emotional wellbeing by providing a safe space to express feelings, process experiences and rehearse social scenarios. **Vygotsky (1978)** emphasised that *“imaginative play allows children to explore emotions and social roles in a symbolic, low risk environment. Through pretend play, children experiment with identities, relationships and challenges, strengthening emotional resilience and social understanding.”* This reflects **Froebel’s (1887)** belief that play is a natural outlet for children’s inner thoughts and feelings. The freedom to choose how and what to play fosters joy, curiosity and creativity qualities that underpin lifelong learning. **Gray (2013)** argues that *“autonomy in play supports competence and emotional security”*.

Self-directed play also embeds learning in meaningful contexts. Children encounter literacy, numeracy, scientific thinking, and social skills naturally within their chosen activities. For example, building with blocks may involve counting, balancing and spatial reasoning, while role play supports language development and emotional expression. **Whitebread et al. (2012)** highlight that *“play supports executive function skills such as planning, working memory and self-regulation, which are foundational for later academic success. Because learning emerges from children’s interests, it is more deeply processed and more likely to be retained.”*

Conclusion

Self-directed play is essential in early childhood because it empowers children to take ownership of their learning, supports intrinsic motivation, and embeds cognitive, social, and emotional development within meaningful, self-chosen activities. Adults play a crucial role by creating enabling environments, providing open-ended resources, observing sensitively and scaffolding learning without dominating the play. Grounded in the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, Froebel, together with other

contemporary researchers, self-directed play remains a cornerstone of effective early childhood pedagogy.

Section 3.

Observation is an essential part of early years practice because it helps practitioners understand how children learn, behave, and develop in everyday situations. By watching and listening to children as they play, interact and explore, practitioners gain an accurate picture of each child as an individual rather than relying on assumptions (**Drake, 2013**). Observations reveal children's interests, strengths, and areas where they may need additional support. They also inform planning, allowing practitioners to design activities that match each child's developmental stage. Observation is central to assessment frameworks such as the EYFS, which emphasises ongoing assessment and early identification of needs (**DfE, 2021**). Overall, observation ensures that children receive learning opportunities that are meaningful, appropriate and supportive of their development.

The method chosen for this assignment is the Leuven Scale for Wellbeing and Involvement, developed by Professor Ferre Laevers at the University of Leuven. This tool focuses on two key areas that strongly influence how children learn: their emotional wellbeing and their level of involvement in activities (**Laevers, 1994**). The Leuven Scale uses two separate five-point scales, with 1 representing low levels and 5 representing elevated levels. Practitioners observe the child during everyday play and score them based on what they see, making the method naturalistic and unobtrusive. This approach helps practitioners understand the child's genuine experience rather than a reaction to adult-led assessment.

Wellbeing refers to how comfortable, confident,- and content the child appears. High wellbeing is shown through relaxed body language, enjoyment, confidence,- together with a sense of belonging. Low well-being can manifest itself through anxiety, frustration or being withdrawn. Involvement focuses on how engaged and focused the child is. Indicators include concentration, persistence, curiosity, creativity, and enthusiasm. A child with high involvement is deeply absorbed in what they are doing, while a child with low involvement may appear distracted or uninterested. These two areas are considered essential foundations for learning, as children learn best when they feel secure and are actively engaged in meaningful experiences.

The aim of the Leuven Scale is not to judge the child's abilities, but rather to understand the quality of their experience. If a child scores low in either area, it may

suggest that the environment or activity is not meeting their needs (**Laevers, 1994**). This allows practitioners to make changes that support the child more effectively, such as adapting resources, adjusting routines, or offering more challenge. The tool encourages reflective practice by prompting practitioners to consider how their environment, routines, and interactions influence children's emotional states and levels of engagement. This reflective element is valuable because it supports continuous improvement within the setting.

There are several benefits to using the Leuven Scale. One strength is that it is child centred, focusing on how the child feels and how deeply they are engaging rather than on what they can do. Emotional security and involvement are intricately linked to effective learning (**Drake, 2013**). Another benefit is that the method is unobtrusive, as observations take place during everyday play, giving practitioners a more accurate picture of the child's experience. The Leuven Scale also supports reflective practice, helping practitioners identify ways to improve the environment, such as offering more challenge or creating calmer spaces. Additionally, it can help identify children who may need extra emotional support or more stimulating activities, supporting the EYFS requirement for early intervention (**DfE, 2021**). This makes it a useful tool for ensuring that provision remains responsive and inclusive.

However, the Leuven Scale also has limitations. One issue is subjectivity, as different practitioners may interpret behaviours differently, leading to inconsistent scoring. Training and shared discussions can help reduce this, but it remains a challenge. Another limitation is the tool's narrow focus. It only assesses wellbeing and involvement, meaning it does not cover other major areas of development such as communication, physical skills, or social development. Because of this, it cannot be used alone to build a full picture of a child's progress. The Leuven Scale is also context dependent, as a child may show high involvement in one activity but low involvement in another. Multiple observations across different situations are therefore needed. Finally, the method can be time-consuming in busy settings.

When considering whether the Leuven Scale provides a holistic view of the child, the answer is mixed. It offers valuable insight into emotional well-being and engagement, which are essential for learning. However, because it only focuses on two areas, it

does not provide a fully holistic view. The Leuven Scale works best when combined with other observation methods to create a complete picture of the child.

Section 4.

Play is a fundamental context for observing and assessing children because it offers an authentic window into their development, interests, and learning dispositions.

When children engage in freely chosen, meaningful play, they reveal skills and behaviours that may remain hidden in adult directed tasks. This makes play-based observation a valid, rich method for understanding cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Play matters for observation because it is intrinsically motivating and self-directed. Children choose the activity, the level of challenge, as well as the pace, so their behaviour reflects genuine competence rather than simple compliance. **Bruce (2015)** argues that play enables children to operate at the edge of their capabilities, permitting them to experiment, problem solve, and take risks in ways that structured activities may not allow. In this sense, play creates conditions for deep level learning, where children show concentration, creativity, and persistence over time. Observing children in play therefore provides a more accurate reflection of their developmental stage because it captures learning as it naturally unfolds, rather than as a response to adult expectations or pressure.

Research supports the view that play offers a more authentic and trustworthy context for assessment than many formal tasks. **Howard and McInnes (2013)** found that children make clear distinctions between activities they perceive as play and those they perceive as work, even when adults intend both to be playful. Their study showed that when children view an activity as work, their involvement decreases and their behaviour becomes more cautious, controlled, and performance driven. In contrast, when children perceive an activity as play, they display higher levels of engagement, experimentation, independence, and creativity. This has direct implications for assessment, because relaxed, absorbed children are more likely to reveal their genuine developmental abilities. The Leuven Scales of Wellbeing and Involvement (**Laevens, 2005**) reinforce this, highlighting that high involvement—often seen in play—is a strong indicator of deep learning, emotional security, and developmental progress.

Adults play a crucial role in enabling accurate play-based observations and must develop both sensitivity and professional knowledge. Effective observation requires practitioners to watch without unnecessary interruption, allowing children to enter a

state of flow. Standing back does not mean being passive; rather, it involves being sensitively attuned to the child's cues and judging when to step in to scaffold learning and when to allow independent exploration. This balance is essential for capturing authentic behaviour and avoiding adult influence that may distort what is observed. A strong knowledge of child's development is also vital because practitioners must understand typical developmental trajectories to interpret what they see accurately. Without this knowledge, observations risk remaining purely descriptive rather than genuinely analytical. Knowing children well, together with their interests, cultural backgrounds, and preferred ways of playing further enhances the accuracy and usefulness of assessment. When practitioners understand what motivates a child, they can better recognise significant learning moments and distinguish between fleeting behaviour and meaningful developmental indicators.

The environment also plays a significant role in supporting accurate observation and high-quality play. An enabling environment provides open-ended resources, opportunities for challenge, and spaces that support both collaboration and solitary play. According to the **Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2023)**, "such environments promote exploration, independence, and sustained engagement". Block play and nature play are strong examples of enabling contexts that naturally invite rich observation. Block play encourages problem solving, spatial reasoning, creativity, and collaboration, while nature play supports sensory exploration, curiosity, resilience, and emotional regulation. Both contexts typically promote elevated levels of involvement, making them ideal for accurate, meaningful observation. High quality observations are objective, specific, and focused on what the child does and says, rather than on assumptions or quick judgements. Skills in noticing subtle cues such as body language, persistence, problem-solving strategies, or social negotiation are essential for capturing the richness of play. Reflective practice further strengthens assessment accuracy, as practitioners consider how their own biases, expectations, or cultural assumptions may influence what they notice and how they interpret it.

Howard and McInnes' (2013) work is particularly relevant because it challenges the assumption that adult designed playful learning is always experienced by children as play. Their findings emphasise the importance of children's agency and perception in determining whether an experience truly feels playful. If an activity is adult led, even

with playful elements, children may still view it as work, reducing the authenticity and reliability of the observation. This reinforces the need for genuine child-initiated play as the foundation for assessment and curriculum decision making. In summary, play is essential for accurate observation and assessment because it provides a natural, meaningful context in which children demonstrate their true developmental abilities and dispositions.

Reference List.

Bento, G., and Dias, G. (2017) 'The importance of outdoor play for young children's healthy development', *Porto Biomedical Journal*, 2(5), pp. 157–160. Available at:

[\(PDF\) The importance of outdoor play for young children's healthy development.](#)

(Accessed: January 27, 2026)

Bruner, J. (1966) *Toward a theory of instruction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Chawla, L. (2015) 'Benefits of nature contact for children', *Journal of Planning Literature*, 30(4), pp. 433–452. Available at: [Benefits of Nature Contact for Children - Louise Chawla, 2015](#). (Accessed: January 2026)

Clements, D.H. and Sarama, J. (2009) *Learning and teaching early math*. New York: Routledge. Available at: [\(PDF\) Learning and teaching early math: The learning trajectories approach \(2nd ed.\)](#) (Accessed January 2026)

Department for Education (DfE) (2024) *Statutory framework for the EYFS*. London: DfE. Available at: [Early years foundation stage \(EYFS\) statutory framework - GOV.UK](#). (Accessed January 2026)

Fjørtoft, I. (2004) 'Landscape as playscape', *Children, Youth and Environments*, 14(2), pp. 21–44. Available at: [Landscape as Playscape](#). (Accessed February 2026)

Hansel, M. (2015) *The block book*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Lester, S. and Maudsley, M. (2007) *Play, naturally*. London: National Children's Bureau. Available at: [\(PDF\) Lester, S and Maudsley, M \(2007\) Play, Naturally. London: NCB](#). (Accessed January 2026)

Ness, D., and Farenga, S. (2007) *Knowledge under construction*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Parten, M. (1932) 'Social participation among preschool children', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 27(3), pp. 243–269. Available at: [Social participation among pre-school children](#). (Accessed February 2026)

Piaget, J. (1951) *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. London: Routledge.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Available at: [Vygotsky - 1978 - Mind in Society Development of Higher Psychology | PDF | Psychology | Marxism](#). (Accessed February 28, 2026)

Gray, P. (2013) *Free to learn*. New York: Basic Books. Available at: [ResearchGate](#). (Accessed February 2026)

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. and Bell, D. (2002) *Researching effective pedagogy in the early years*. London: DfES. Available at: [Microsoft Word - JuneEPEY202.doc](#). (Accessed February 2026)

Whitebread, D., Basilio, M., Kuvalja, M. and Verma, M. (2012) *The importance of play*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge. Available at: [The importance of play](#). (Accessed February 2026)

Wood, E. (2014) 'Free choice and free play in early childhood education: Troubling the discourse', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 22(1), pp. 4–18. Available at: [Learning Through Play Further Reading | Bristol Early Years Research](#). (Accessed February 2026)

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Available at: [\(PDF\) Bronfenbrenner: Ecology of Human Development in Ecology of Collaboration](#). (Accessed February 2026)

Froebel, F. (1887) *The education of man*. New York: Appleton. Gray, P. (2013) *Free to learn*. New York: Basic Books. Available at: [the education of man : friedrich froebel : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#). (Accessed February 26, 2026)

Piaget, J. (1962) *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. London: Routledge. Available at: [Play, dreams and imitation in childhood : Piaget, Jean, 1896-1980 : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#). (Accessed February 27, 2026)

DfE (2021) *Statutory framework for the early year's foundation stage: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. Department for Education. Available at: [EYFS statutory framework for group and school-based providers](#). (Accessed February 27, 2026)

Drake, J. (2013) *Planning for children's play and learning: Meeting children's needs in the later stages of the EYFS*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.

Laevers, F. (1994) 'The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children', in Laevers, F. (ed.) *Wellbeing and involvement in care settings: A process-oriented self-evaluation instrument*. Leuven: Leuven University Press. Available at: [leuven-scales.png \(650×774\)](#), (Accessed February 28, 2026)

Bruce, T. (2015) *Early Childhood Education*. 5th ed. London: Hodder Education.

Department for Education (DfE) (2023) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. London: DfE. Available at: [Early years foundation stage statutory framework for childminders](#). (Accessed February 28, 2026)

Howard, J. and McInnes, K. (2013) *The Essence of Play: A Practice Companion for Professionals Working with Children and Young People*. London: Routledge.

Laevers, F. (2005) 'The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children', *Experiential Education Series*, 1(1), pp. 27–36. Available at: [irresistible-learning.co.uk Pete Moorhouse](#). (Accessed February 28, 2026)

Robertson, J. (2014). *Dirty Teaching: A Beginner's Guide to Learning Outdoors*.