

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

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Section 1- Play and Holistic Development

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that play is a right that every child is entitled to regardless of their religion, abilities and race, (UNICEF, 1989). Bottril (2018) defines play as limitless possibilities and experiences with opportunities for self-led challenges and vast interpretations. Play is collaboration, creativity, encounters risk, interpretation, revaluation and has a limitless meaning. Learning Through Play (n.d.) notes that various skills are incorporated through play which are demonstrated freely and simultaneously. These skills are referred to as holistic, children learn as they play and weave them all together as they progress through their development, (learningthroughplay.com, n.d.)

Davies (2022) notes that children begin to role play as they start to develop an understanding of the world around them, Smilansky introduced the term sociodramatic play, to describe this type of imaginative play. Children are free to demonstrate characterisation, use of dialog and imagination within their play, (Davies 2022).

Role play can be supported by using a range of diverse resources, creative materials, themed areas and a variety of props. Welsh Government (2020) highlights the importance of practitioners addressing children's needs by choosing child-led, relevant themes and activities that will better impact children's learning. Settings can heavily rely on plastic toys/props within the role play corner, especially indoors as they are considered safer. However, Cankaya (2023) notes how toys made from plastic limit children's use of them as they have a specific purpose and therefore can limit a child's ability to be imaginative within their play. Davies, (2017) agrees with this concept explaining how the Montessori approach supports the use of real-life props as real equipment can ignite a child's imagination and develop an understanding of the world in a concrete form, giving children hands on experiences and meaningful learning.

Davies (2022) notes many benefits of role play (imaginative play) in supporting holistic development. Role play can generate creativity and is demonstrated through opportunities that initiate curiosity, diversity, exploration and moments that allow a child to express themselves. This is supported by the UNCRC (article 13) explaining how children need the freedom of expression, to express their opinions and thoughts

which is fundamental during role play and fostering creativity, (UNICEF, 1989). Drew (2022) notes how creativity and imagination can promote problem solving skills which generates new ideas, which in return can lead to higher levels of self-esteem and confidence, supporting the child's well-being and emotional development. My First Five Years (2023) agrees with this, suggesting children need freedom to experience moments of achievement as they play and explore to develop their creativity as it is highly beneficial for their mental health and well-being. Creativity offers opportunities for children to adapt approaches and introduce new skills highly impacting their problem-solving abilities and cognitive skills. This is supported by Zosh, Hassinger-Das and Laurie (2022) noting how children can demonstrate their creativity for example using chairs to make a bus or to be a superhero with a tablecloth as a cape, allowing children to experience new solutions to their problems. Role play generates several sub-skills which are present through the development of creative skills alone, which are intertwined supporting children's holistic development, (Zosh, Hassinger-Das and Laurie, 2022).

Drew (2020) explains Mildred Parton's theory of play outlining the six stages of play which include unoccupied play (0-3 months), solitary play (3 months- 2 years), onlooker play (2 years), parallel play (2 years), associative play (3-4 years) and cooperative play (4+ years). She believed that children developed through these stages in a linear pattern through the first five years of childhood, (Drew, 2020). Drew (2020) describes role play as a form of play, 4 ½ years and up where children act out their favourite characters within a scenario and is an example of cooperative play. Children will play together, share, will have mutual goals, agree on roles in the game, and work together to achieve their goals. Achievements of socialization can be present, however social skills are still developing, (Drew, 2020). Loizou (2017) describes how Vygotsky's scaffolding theory needs to be considered here, where practitioners need to observe, assess and recognise when to intervene appropriately to enhance learning, offering guidance and support to aid children master skills such as turn taking, compromise, and sharing.

Outdoor play provide is a form of exploratory play incorporating natural elements, such as soil, plants, and wildlife, (Welsh Gov, n.d). Davies (2022) explains how children instinctively become curious during this form of play which encourages

exploration and investigation of the world around them through their senses. This involves trial and error which stimulates children's cognitive abilities, with endless possibilities, learning experiences and outcomes where children learn holistically without pressure, (Davies, 2022).

Maynard and Waters (2014) note how the outdoor environment needs to be supported with exciting, relevant, motivating and easily accessible learning experiences and equipment, suitable for all ages and needs. Maynard and Waters (2014) explain how the outdoor environment can be supported using Froebel 's ideas acknowledging that children need an outdoor area and space to play with equipment and resources to encourage outdoor activities. This fosters care for the environment through activities including gardening, harvesting, exploring, (Maynard and Waters, 2014). Welsh Government (n.d.) supports this concept through their curriculum guidance explaining how practitioners need to provide an enabling environment to promote and support outdoor learning allowing children to experience real-life learning opportunities, to capture their interest and promote sustained, focused engagement in active learning over extended periods. Maynard and Waters (2014) highlight that children need to sow seeds, harvest plants, see the seasons change, be aware of the cycle of life and the small creatures and insects around them to promote rich learning experiences.

Maynard and Waters (2014) explain how outdoor play is beneficial for developing children's social skills. Providing opportunities to share equipment, listen to each other, take turns and voice ideas. Zosh, Hassinger-Das and Laurie, (2022) suggests that children need a strong identity of themselves, their and others' needs, wants and perspective before developing abilities to negotiate, share and respond effectively in testing situations. By securing social skills children need to begin to gain an understanding of socio-emotional development and develop empathy for each other and the world around them. Welsh Government (n.d) highlights the importance of this through their curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, explaining how outdoor play benefits children as they build and experience empathy for the environment which supports emotional development and an awareness of the impact they have on the world and their surroundings. Psychology Today (2024) supports this emphasising how children who often play outdoors tend to foster a greater

concern for nature and develop empathy for the world around them, deepening their understanding and knowledge of nature. Children learn from real life experiences regarding wildlife and ecosystems through observing, exploring forests and engaging in conversations and group discussions deepening their knowledge and understanding of the world around them. Welsh Government (n.d) also acknowledges how spending time outdoors is vital for young children, as it nurtures social, emotional, spiritual, and physical development, all of which contribute to children's overall well-being and holistic development.

Drew (2020) describes outdoor play as a form of exploratory play, which can be seen during parallel play (3 1/2-4 years). Children can explore near each other but not necessarily together. Play may involve sharing equipment and resources, but children will distantly observe each other, unable yet to share goals whilst playing or be part of the same game/activity, (Drew 2020). This aligns with Maslow's need for love and belongingness within the hierarchy, physiological needs have been met and the importance of social needs become meaningful, seeking a sense of belonging within a group, fostering relationships and friendships, (Stevens, 2024).

Section 2 – Self-directed Play

Aminpour, Bishop and Corkery (2020, cited Hughes, 2010; Juster, 2015; Vygotsky, 1980) describes self-directed play as a form of autonomous play that emerges when children independently decide what to play and establish their own rules, driven by their personal, self-motivated interests. Welsh Government (2020) supports this explaining how children need to experience play that involves behaviour that is freely chosen, self-directed, and directly motivated by children. It is undertaken without any external goal or reward and is a vital and an essential component of healthy development. Aminpour, Bishop and Corkery (2020, cited Hoffmann & Russ, 2016; Riley & Jones, 2010) explain how this type of play is seen as beneficial for developing children's problem-solving abilities and allows for self-discovery without the fear of failure (Hoffmann & Russ, 2016; Riley & Jones, 2010). Russell (2023) notes how self-directed play can be in different forms and especially important to young children as it encourages them to engage, make connections and learn about the world around them independently.

The Montessori school of the Burkschires (2024) believes that self- directed play is important as it develops the child's self-confidence through exploration, choice and opportunities to create their own ideas and games. This fosters feelings of success and realisation of their own independence skills. By giving children opportunities to play freely ultimately stimulates their imagination allowing them to be creative, producing their own story lines and scenarios. The Montessori school of the Burkschires (2024) also notes how this provides opportunities and freedom to solve problems across all areas of development where children can learn at their own pace. Knowledge can grow and build as they play within a safe, nonjudgmental environment giving them high feelings of self-worth and achievement. These feelings of fulfilment and success cultivates motivation and will naturally drive progression to take on new challenges, develop new ideas and find joy as they learn, (The Montessori school of the Burkschires, 2024). Welsh Government (n.d) reinforces these ideas explaining how experiences that are relevant and meaningful, grounded in real-life contexts, will help children make connections, apply their knowledge, and strengthen their skills allowing learning to become embedded.

Davies (2022) believes that for children's play to remain play the adult must not attempt to take control, manipulate or take charge of the play for set targets, play must be authentic. Care Learning (2025) explains how the play cycle gives adults a better understanding of children's play and their role in supporting it. This can make adults more aware of children's invitations to join their play and avoid adulteration. Piaget supports this within his theory highlighting how children need to interact and explore the environment as children learn through curiosity and exploration, (McLeod, 2024).

However, according to Davies (2022) for children to fully benefit from their play the role of the adult is crucial in supporting child development, with knowledge and understanding of how to facilitate, extend and develop it. This can be done through close observation to gain important information of what interests the child, their stage of development and engagement abilities. These skills are fundamental for practitioners in supporting self-directed play, because practitioners need to understand children's perception of play, and provide positive, beneficial intervention

(Davies, 2022). Welsh Assembly Government Play Policy 2002, (n.d) highlights how play needs to be self-directed and freely chosen and requires adults to respond, effectively and positively by extending the range of opportunities within the environment to address all needs, support development, well-being and safety. Davies (2022) notes how observation is imperative within the role of the adult, as the information gathered feeds future planning giving opportunities to reflect, reassess and adjust the environment ensuring children receive rich, learning experiences. In addition to this Welsh Government (n.d) reinforces the importance of observation within the adult's role, as recording clear, manageable observations, indoor and out through various types of play allows the child to develop skills holistically which can be recorded. Appropriately documented observations become a starting point for reflection, assessment and guides future planning to allow each child to reach their full potential.

Section 3- Observing Children

Francisco (2019) notes how child observations entail listening whilst watching, appropriate questioning, documenting and assessment through analysing the actions and words of children. This can be done alone in play, through interaction with others and the environment around them, (Francisco, 2019). Mcleod (2024) explains how observation through play is important as it allows for practitioners to make assessments of the whole child leading to further progression and development, adjusting the approach when needed. Estyn (2024) notes how reflecting and reviewing observations allows opportunities to reinforce a child's understanding of concepts and skills to extend learning. This information needs to be communicated to all members of staff, making them aware of children's needs and defining moments within play. Adults need to include this consistently and continuously as part of practice where noticing, analysing and responding to areas within children's development is essential in planning for future learning, (Estyn, 2024). Welsh Government's (n.d) curriculum for funded non-maintained nurseries supports this explaining how observations are crucial for determining where a child is at within their learning journey. Observations allows practitioners insight into the child's knowledge, emotions, skills, well-being, competencies, interest and motivation. This

can contribute towards identifying strengths and abilities to plan the next developmental steps, incorporating the strategies needed to support them, and removing any barriers to their learning, (Assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings 2, n.d.).

Brodie (n.d.) explains how narrative observations, are extended written accounts of a child's activity, including a word for word record of their language, their level of involvement and other children they interact with. Ideally, the child's key person should carry out the observation, as they are most familiar with the context of the child's play. Practitioners observe children for 20 to 30 minutes and capture as much information as possible, (Brodie, n.d.).

Brodie (n.d.) explains how this form of observation can prove to be time consuming in comparison to other methods. Consequently, this method can be used less often, with children becoming aware of adult's behaviour which lowers their interest in play, therefore compromising the quality of the observation, (Brodie, n.d.). Welsh Government (n.d) agrees with this explaining how observations shouldn't be a long inefficient process. However, Bruce, Louis, and McCall, (2015) explain that narrative observations are lengthy, but can capture more of the child's imagination, encouraged by their choice of interactions. This can be of greater importance to them, and the adults observing when planning for future learning. Welsh Government (n.d) supports this statement through their curriculum for funded non-maintained settings providing guidance on how observations assist practitioners in retrieving information regarding what interests, engages and motivates children to help towards future planning and progression, emphasising how children learn best when experiences are relevant and catered to their individual interests.

Brodie (n.d) also notes a positive for this type of observation is that it can be planned, therefore making certain that all children will be observed within a given time frame. However, Bruce, Louis, and McCall, (2015) note how the narrative method focusses on what the child can do but can also be done through a running record where the notes are taken immediately, unplanned as the child is exhibiting moments of developmental progression. This highlights an ability to use the method at any given time, (Bruce, Louis and McCall, 2015).

Bruce, Louis and McCall (2015) continue to explain how aspects including well-being, emotions, thoughts, spiritual needs, motivation and self-discipline can be seen through use of this method. Emphasising that learning is not a tick box exercise but interlinked allowing the adults to observe holistic development through children's play and experiences, and how observations can be set as the base for their education, (Bruce, Louis and McCall, 2015).

Section 4 – Role of Play

Moyles (2010) notes how play is natural for children and emphasises the adult's role in providing endless opportunities for children to engage and explore through play. Children learn from hands on experiences, based on prior knowledge and play provides the platform for this, deepening their understanding and learning (Moyles 2010). Play is important during observation as children will naturally exhibit their skills and knowledge. Welsh Gov (n.d) suggests that through observing children through play caregivers will be better able to record and understand a child's stage of development through their activities highlighting their likes, dislikes and interests. Opportunities also arise within play to record what children are curious about, how they interact and communicate with others and their approach towards spaces and resources. This allows caregivers to gain holistic understanding of the child's development, and plan for future learning experiences and progression, (Welsh Gov n.d). Piaget agreed with Vygotsky that children are active learners and learn through self-directed play therefore highlighting how play can be the ideal time to conduct observations, (Smidt 2015).

The classroom app 'Seesaw' (2024) allows play to be recorded as a form of observation, stored and shared with parents and outside agencies when required. Parents can use this app at home to record their children's play creating a strong learning connection between students, teachers, and families. Digital portfolios of children naturally playing and learning holistically can be created giving parents opportunities to share playing experiences from home. Parent Map (n.d.) suggests how a child's behaviour at school can differ from their behaviour at home, as they may face greater challenges in one environment compared to the other. This

highlights how the 'Seesaw App' can be useful for settings to retrieve a fuller picture of the child's development, as children may feel more comfortable within their home environment to exhibit skills which could contribute to observations and assessments within the setting, (Seesaw, 2024). The 'Seesaw' app can show the child's learning journey allowing collaboration with families, promoting progression as a two-way partnership, (Seesaw, 2024).

Besio *et al.* (2018) therefore, explains how observations need to be done during play as it is the most natural environment for children to demonstrate their abilities through a variety of skills initiated by their own interests. This can provide richer information as the child naturally demonstrates his/her skills in a relaxed manner with reflection giving a better insight into the child's development, future planning and gives a clearer picture of their own, unique, real self.

Smidt (2015) suggests that when adults observe children their awareness of deeper thinking becomes important. Smidt (2015) also notes how the adult's role includes standing back, listening and watching to gather holistic information regarding the child. Welsh Gov (n.d) agrees with this explaining how the enabling adult needs to stand back, listen and observe allowing play to progress and develop. Carlina Rinaldi suggests that listening when observing is the base for learning together and educational relationships, (Smidt, 2015). Through active listening adults can respond appropriately to enhance the child's learning experiences. The adult's role entails being alert and sensitive to everything children say and their actions, through active listening and observation the adult can build on the child's prior knowledge and through analysis and reflection can align their findings with strands of development, (Smidt, 2015). Rosa (2015) suggests that observation is the onset of planning, imperative within the adult's role in driving progression and is done following reflection upon what has been learnt from prior observation and assessment.

Isaacs believed that through play children will naturally answer questions they themselves have produced implying very little adult intervention is required to support learning, (Smidt, 2015). Vygotsky however, suggested that it is the role of the adult to assess a child's level of ability and be aware of their role in moving them forward through their learning without an invitation. This concept means that what children could not do originally without adult guidance will eventually be achieved

independently, (Helpful Professor, 2019). Smidt (2015), highlights how practitioners need to undergo sufficient training within their role to become confident, knowledgeable and competent at observing children. Practitioners can then fully appreciate their role within the play cycle, and how observations can be used as a valid tool within the setting through children's play.

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Appendix

I have not used AI.