

I have used generated AI in my work. The prompts I used were:

What does pathic mean?

What does ambivalent mean?

Where does Susan Isaacs talk about self-directed play in social development in young children?

Where does Susan Isaacs talk about children developing independence through play in social development in young children?

Help me locate the chapter about free play in social development in young children.

What page in social development in young children does Isaacs talk about free play?

When did Friedrich Froebel talk about children's learning as the highest level of understanding?

What does Piaget mean when he mentions hereditary resurrection?

The importance of play is recognised all over the world. Its importance in supporting a child develop holistically is highlighted in literature, policies and procedures and now law. In 2010 the Welsh government were the first country in the world to implement children's opportunity to play into law. (Play Wales, 2026). Froebel (1836, quoted in Daly et al, 2006. P.171) saw play as the highest level of learning, which children were able to develop skills that they already know and apply them to overcome challenges. Davies (2023) agrees and claims play is a vital component of children's learning and development, as it promotes the development of communication, physical, emotional, and social skills. Play supports children's emotional wellbeing by developing feelings of security, belonging, and happiness, which are essential for positive developmental outcomes. As well as Froebel and Play Wales, the UNCRC (1990) recognised the importance of play as have included play in the UNCRC. Article 31 states that every child has the right to engage in play and recreational activities.

The consistent emphasis across research and practice on the importance of children's play suggests strong evidence in its value to children's development and practitioners should provide rich opportunities for play in their setting that help children to develop holistically.

Children take part in many different play types throughout their childhood which contribute to their holistic development. This section covers two different types of play, rough and tumble play and imaginative play.

Rough and Tumble play is a type of physical play. 'It consists of the vigorous behaviors such as wrestling, grappling, jumping, tumbling, and running that would appear to be

aggressive if not for the play contexts' (Pellegrini and Smith, 1998) It can be defined as 'verbally and physical cooperative play behavior involving at least two children, where all participants enjoyably and voluntarily engage in reciprocal role-playing that includes aggressive make-believe themes, actions, and words; yet lacks intent to harm either [child] emotionally or physically' (Hart and Tannock cited in) It supports children's holistic development by improving children's social and emotional skills by building friendships with peers, communicating social cues, and developing self-control and resilience. Storli, R. (2021) It helps children's physically by developing strength and coordination and body control Children learn how to control their movements and become aware of their physical ability. Children's cognitive development happens during rough and tumble play as learn how to solve problems and make decisions quickly. Throughout the play children are communicating by talking to each other and discussing rules, smiling and laughing. All this helps with children's language and communication development. An observational study found that participation in rough-and-tumble play helps children establish social roles and relationships. This process appears to lower levels of aggression while also promoting the development of important social and thinking skills. (Broadhead *et al.*, 2010, p 62)

Imaginative play is described as children recreating and playing out real life scenarios that they have seen or experienced themselves. They could be a princess trapped in a tower, waiting for their handsome prince to come and rescue them, a teacher using their toys as the children (Walters-Davies, J. 2022) or they could be playing house and being the mam, dad or baby. Imaginative play can be solitary or social. Either way it helps children to develop holistically by developing their emotional and social skills where they could be playing out scenarios where they can experience different outcomes and different thoughts and emotions which helps them gain an understanding of empathy for others (Walters-Davies, J. 2022) When a child engages in their own play, they do not look at the world in the same way adults look at the world. Children's symbolic thinking is egocentric, so they experience their play in a personally meaningful way that reflects their own outlook. They do not let the expectations of reality and what is expected of them restrict their play. This allows the child to create and maintain a private, imaginative world where they can explore ideas and roles without restrictions. (Piaget,

J. 1951, P 168) These types of play align with the work of theorists Susan Isaacs and Lev Vygotsky. Both considered play to be of high importance to children's development. Vygotsky with children learning through social interaction and Isaacs acknowledging the importance of imaginative play (Daly et al., 2006)

In 1932, Mildred Parten Newhall developed Parten's six stages of play. They describe how children's social development progresses through play. It shows progression from independent play through to cooperative play. (Early Years TV, 2026)

- Stage 1 – Unoccupied play, birth to 3 months.
- Stage 2 - Solitary play, 3 months to 2 years. Children play by themselves and focus on their own activity, even when there are other children around to play with. An example of this would be a child stacking blocks by themselves.
- Stage 3 – Onlooker play, 2 years. An example of this would be a child watching others play a game but not participating.
- Stage 4 – Parallel play, 2 years and older. Children play by themselves next to other children, playing in the same area, at the same time even playing the same activity. An example of this would be two children drawing a picture next to each other but not talking.
- Stage 5 – Associative play, 3 to 4 years. Children are still playing separately but there is some interaction with other children. They share equipment, take turns and talk to each other. An example of this would be children sharing toys and talking while playing, but each doing their own thing.
- Stage 6 – Cooperative play, 4 years and older. Children play together with shared goals, rules and roles. An example of this would be children playing house together and assigning roles like mum, dad or baby.

(Bulgarelli and Bianquin 2017)

By supporting these forms of play in practice, practitioners create environments that nurture creativity and development across all areas of learning. When play is valued and carefully enabled, it becomes a basis for holistic development.

Self-directed play gives children the freedom to play independently, choosing their own materials and following their own interests, without structure or adult direction. It allows them to lead their own learning experiences without interference. (Play adventures 2019) Adopting a similar position, The Steiner Connection (2020) defines Self-directed play as play that is led and instigated by the child, where the child is motivated by an object in their environment. Welsh government (2023) understands the importance of self-directed play as in section seven of National minimum standards for regulated childcare for children up to the age of 12 years, they outline that children should have the opportunity to engage in freely chosen, self-directed play. Supporting this view Play England (2026, quoted in Waters-Davies, 2022 p. 37) defines it as children deciding what how and when they play where there is no direction from adults and no end.

Adults can support self-directed play by offering diverse opportunities that extend beyond their immediate interests to help promote broader development, as Woods (2017) suggests that children's interests are shaped and constrained by the range of experiences they encounter. They should remember that whilst children are engaging in self-directed play, the child should be in complete control of their play, without any interference of an adult unless for safety reasons or they have been invited by the child. They should also consider that the physical learning environment is crucially as important as the play that is occurring. They should 'organise the physical learning environment into areas of activity, where all types of learning can be developed in each space, hereby conceptualising them as physical spaces for activity or resources rather than areas for learning' (Woods, A. 2017) When environments are arranged in this way, children can move around freely, choosing resources that interest them which help develop a range of skills.

Lededecker (2020) hold the view that self-directed play is important because it helps children in a multitude of ways. It supports the development of confidence and promotes independence, as children discover their own abilities and recognise that they can do things independently without help from an adult. It enhances imagination and creativity as children are naturally inclined to explore ideas and express themselves freely without interference from others, which strengthens their creative thinking. Also, it supports the

development of critical thinking skills. As children create and adapt their own play experiences, they are forced to think critically and find solutions to challenges that arise. Self-directed play also enables children to learn at their own pace, free from external pressures or predetermined outcomes. This allows them to build on their existing knowledge at a pace that suits their needs. Finally, it promotes self-motivation, as children engage in play for their own enjoyment rather than what is expected or determined. This encourages them to explore new ideas, challenge themselves, and experience personal satisfaction in their learning. Gray (2011) documented a connection between the decline of free play and a rise in depression and mental health difficulties. According to research by Children's Society and Children's Play Council (2007) Great Britain was found to be limiting children engaging in self-directed play. 500 children aged between seven and eleven were surveyed through their participation in self-directed play. The data indicated that 45 percent of the children were restricted or had limited opportunity to play with water, 33 percent were prevented from climbing trees, 27 percent were not allowed to use climbing equipment, and 23 percent were prohibited from riding on bikes and skateboards. However, the importance of self-directed play is now recognised as beneficial for children and children are now given more opportunity for their play to be child-led. In conclusion, enabling children to choose their own play respects their individuality and interests. A balanced approach where children lead and adults sensitively support, creates meaningful play experiences that promote confidence and wellbeing.

'Observing children is listening, observing and watching without putting an agenda on to it. Seeing what they are actually doing without trying to analyse it at the time but taking or noting a 'snapshot' and reflecting on this later' (Childminder, Wales. Cited in Pacey Cymru, 2026) similarly, The Welsh Government (2021) holds the opinion of observations as documenting as you view and listen carefully to children as they work or play to determine how they are developing and then using that information to plan appropriate provision for children's learning. Both agree that observations are an important part of practice and explain that they are an effective way to understand how children are developing and they help practitioners to inform current planning, ensuring it is purposeful and relevant and also helps with forward planning and next step to

extend children's learning and development. Assessment is a necessary component in helping us support children's development that suits their individual needs, ensuring they receive the right amount of support and challenge. Welsh Government (2024) states observation is important because 'Observation helps us to find out what motivates, interests and engages young children. It helps us to understand their levels of involvement, their emotional states, their friendships, skills and competencies' Undertaking observations is also important because they may uncover unexpected results that may not have been predicted due to practitioners having formed bias or a pre-determined outcome as they are familiar with the children in their care. (Macleod-Brudenell and Kay (2008)

(Welsh Government, 2024) features the repeated observational process of notice, analyse and respond. It states that it should be part of our daily routine. We should take note of 'children's interests, fascinations, levels of engagement and emotions. Next, we should analyse and interpret what we see and hear. Then respond, which informs current and future planning of experiences. With this in mind

One type of observation method is a running record. According to Peterson and Elam (2020) it is one of the oldest and informal methods of observation used in early years practice and they provide the practitioner with a detailed written account of a child during an exact time and place. Unlike others such as Leuven scale or questionnaires which only provide a small insight into the child at a specific moment and does not provide a reason why something has occurred. (Palaiologou 2012) With running records providing practitioners with detailed descriptions they are able to see what a child can do as well as an understanding of how and why they have approached or overcome a challenge. As with any observation methods there are benefits and limitations to its usage.

Benefits of running record:

- You only need a pen and paper to carry out the observation
- It provides detailed in the moment evidence
- you may see something unexpected occur

- Easy to access to look back at
- They are adaptable and can be used for groups of children as well as individuals

Limitations of running record:

- It is an in the moment observation, so you need to write quickly, as children move and play around the room.
- When you are writing you may miss something that the child may be doing.
- It can be time consuming
- Children may not be feeling well or behaving in a typical way during the observation, giving false evidence.
- If a child is aware they are being observed, they may change their behavior to what they think the practitioner would like to see.

(Peterson and Elam 2020)

Because running records detail everything a child says and does it captures many different aspects of behavior providing a holistic view of the child during observation. The observation method demonstrates how assessment can strengthen the understanding of a child's development. When used effectively, this method allows practitioners to identify strengths, recognise areas for support, and plan meaningful experiences.

'Observing children in their play is paramount to understanding the child's needs, behaviours, preferences, well-being and interests' (Pacey Cymru, 2026) When children play, they are more confident, motivated and willing to take risks in their learning. They are choosing activities based on their interests and are not doing things because someone has told them to, nor are they doing things for someone else, they are doing things purely for their own enjoyment. Carrying out observations during play, without the child being aware they are being observed, prevents them changing their behaviour to how they think the practitioner would want them to behave. This is known as the Hawthorne effect. (Adair, 1984). Observing children when they are playing will allow practitioners to have an accurate reflection of the child's likes and dislikes and their stage of their development because during play they act out and recreate real life

experiences and use what they already know to make sense of it, which reveals their current knowledge and understanding. When conducting an observation during role play, a child may display vocabulary and emotional understanding that may not have presented itself during structured questioning that the practitioner may have set out. Equally, cognitive development skills such as critical thinking can be seen and identified when children play and interact with blocks or puzzles. A practitioner observing a child during imaginative play may uncover a child's literacy skills. For example, where they are reading a book to a class pretending to be a teacher or numeracy ability where they are 'teaching' children to count. Theory provides a strong basis for observing and assessing children during play. Lev Vygotsky (1978, quoted in Daly et al, 2006, p. 173) proposed that during play children operate within a zone of proximal development, much higher than they would typically show during everyday situations, moving around a classroom or outdoor area. Meaning during play, children are able to demonstrate skills and thinking beyond their usual level of learning and development whilst interacting with the environment. Likewise, Jean Piaget (1951) believed that children actively learn through interaction with their environment. Implying that the environment is just as important to children's play, as the equipment and activity being carried out. Besio *et al* (2018) explains that observing children during play relieves the unnecessary pressure of being observed and possible feelings of failure or lack of ability and may provide the opportunity for unforeseen skills to be seen by the practitioner. This approach is recognised in guidelines such as Assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings (Welsh Government 2023) The guidance highlights that observing children during solitary and collaborative play is as important as observing them throughout the day during planned activities. Recognising the role of play within observation and assessment ensures that children are viewed with an holistic view. Observing children during play supports more accurate and holistic assessments, as it captures natural behaviours and genuine authentic engagement that truly reflects the child's abilities, rather than as a response to adult-led testing or structured questioning.

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