

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

Module: ECEY4003

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Submission Date: 28 February 2026

Word Count: 3060

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Section 1

Every child has the right to play (UNICEF UK, 2019). Play helps children learn and grow through having different experiences that help them make sense of the world around them. There are many different types of play that encourage and support children's holistic development (Hargraves, 2019).

One type of play that is important for children's holistic development is physical play. Research by Play Wales (2023) suggests that physical play and it is a type of play that encourages children to move around and explore the environment through movement such as running, walking, climbing, cycling, dancing and jumping. In practice, physical play is supported by practitioners providing children many opportunities to move freely and explore the environment. For example, providing outdoor spaces for running and games like tag or stuck in the mud, climbing equipment that encourages balance, strength and resilience and loose parts with natural materials like tyres, crates and logs or planks that children can lift, roll and build with. Hargraves (2019) highlights that physical play helps children understand what is safe and when to risk take, supporting children's confidence and decision-making skills. Physical play is important for children to start understanding what abilities they have, it encourages children to practice social, emotional, cognitive and physical skills in a fun way and gain confidence in what they can do.

Physical play benefits children's health, well-being, coordination and fitness, helping support children's basic needs and gain the skills to grow into the best version of themselves. It also supports children's social and emotional growth. Through having fun, engaging and exciting experiences without adult intervention, physical play gives children opportunities to have social interactions, turn taking, learn how to regulate emotions, make bonds and friendships, collaborate, problem solve and build resilience, supporting children's holistic development (Play Wales, 2023).

Physical play links strongly to the Curriculum of Wales. The Welsh Government (n.d.) emphasises in the Health and Well-Being area of learning and experience that children should develop physical skills, confidence and an understanding of how movement supports their wellbeing. Opportunities for movement such as running, dancing, jumping, chasing and exploring the outdoor environment help children become capable, confident and ambitious learners.

Exploratory play is another important form of play, as it allows children to use all their senses to investigate new objects, environments, and materials. Through this type of play, children test ideas, discover how things work, and build early problem-solving skills. Early Education (2021) suggests that it is important for practitioners to provide rich sensory opportunities such as clay, loose parts, playdough, blocks, water trays, sand trays, nature walks, and sensory tuff trays across both indoor and outdoor environments. In practice, this means creating a stimulating and holistic learning space that offers open-ended materials and a range of challenges so that all children can explore, take risks, and thrive. This aligns with Article 3 of the UNCRC, which states that practitioners must always act in the best interests of the child (UNICEF UK, 2019).

Exploratory play also links to the Curriculum for Wales, as it supports active, hands-on learning across multiple Areas of Learning and Experience, especially in Health and Well-being and Science and Technology. Because exploratory play is open-ended and accessible at different developmental stages, it enables children to follow their natural curiosity and learn through trial and error. This type of play strengthens cognitive development through problem-solving and resilience, enhances fine motor skills, supports creativity and understanding of cause and effect, and encourages communication as children excitedly share findings with friends and practitioners (Welsh Government, n.d.).

Exploratory play is especially valuable for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), as it provides sensory-rich experiences that can be adapted to individual needs. These activities support emotional regulation, offer opportunities for children to communicate—verbally or through communication boards—and help practitioners gain deeper understanding of each individual child's interests. Exploratory play also promotes engagement, strengthens fine motor development, and builds trusting relationships through shared experiences and play. Sensory and exploratory activities ensure every child is included, supported, and able to participate in the setting meaningfully (PlayBoard Northern Ireland, 2020).

According to Explorations Early Learning (2020) Parten's stages of play show how children become more social as they grow, beginning with unaccompanied play from birth, moving up stages to eventually play together in groups. Early stages like

solitary play, onlooker play and parallel play help children explore materials and develop confidence. As they move into associative and cooperative play, they start sharing ideas, taking turns, and working towards shared goals. This links well with Piaget's theory, which explains how children's thinking develops through different types of play. For example, symbolic play is shown as through these stages children begin to use imagination, emotions, create rules for games and start to become more logical about how they play. Together, these theories show that through different types of play children become more social, confident and their thinking also becomes more advanced and complex (Saracho, 2017).

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Section 2

Self-directed play is an important way of learning in the early years because it allows children to take the lead, follow their own interests, and make meaningful choices about how they spend their time. Child Therapy Service (2025) suggests this child-led play encourages children to decide what to do, how to do it, and when to move on, giving them a strong sense of self. This freedom is a powerful and important for learning. Child Therapy Service (2025) also implies that when children choose activities that genuinely interest them, they become more deeply engaged, and more motivated to explore, experiment, and problem-solve. Du Toit-Brits (2019) believes this motivation is a strong foundation for lifelong learning, as it encourages children to see themselves as capable, curious learners who can take initiative and think independently.

One of the main reasons self-directed play is so important is that it supports a wide range of developmental skills simultaneously. Children practise decision-making as they choose materials and plan their play. They develop problem-solving skills as they encounter challenges, test ideas, and adapt their strategies. Creativity flourishes because children are free to imagine, invent, and transform materials to become and used as different things. Social and emotional development is also strengthened, as children learn to manage their own feelings, cope with frustration, and build resilience through trial and error. In self-directed play, children also reflect on older ideas repeatedly, deepening their understanding over time and building confidence in their own abilities (Hamamcı and Balaban Dagal 2022).

Self-directed play is linked to Montessori as The Education Hub (2020) highlights that she believed that children learn best when they are free to choose activities that match their interests and developmental needs. She saw children as independent, active learners who are capable of directing their own experiences. Montessori's idea of the prepared environment highlights that practitioners should create environments that encourage exploration, offer meaningful choices, and allow children to act independently. In rich and stimulating environments, children naturally engage in purposeful, self-directed activities that support and encourage concentration, coordination, and problem-solving (Welsh Government, n.d.). Montessori also encouraged adults to follow the child, meaning that practitioners

should observe children closely and support their interests rather than stepping in and directing their play.

Although self-directed play is led by the child, the practitioner's role is still just as important. Effective practitioners act as careful observers, watching children's play to understand their interests, strengths, and needs. UNICEF & The LEGO Foundation (2018) emphasis that this observation allows practitioners to plan environments and experiences that reflect children's interests, ensuring that play remains meaningful and engaging. Practitioners should also provide open-ended, flexible resources that encourage exploration and creativity. This might include natural materials, loose parts, construction resources, sensory items, and opportunities for imaginative play. By designing a rich, stimulating environment, practitioners ensure that children have the freedom to play and learn in their own unique ways, upholding children's right to access meaningful and engaging play as outlined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF UK (2019)).

Play Wales (2023) suggests another key aspect of the practitioner's role is knowing when to step in and when to step back. In self-directed play, adults do not lead or control the activity, but they remain present, responsive, and ready to support learning when appropriate. This might involve offering new vocabulary, modelling language, asking open-ended questions, or introducing additional materials to further challenge their thinking and problem-solving skills. These interactions must be done in the right moment so that the practitioner supports learning without interrupting the child's play. Utami & Yus (2025) research shows this reflects Vygotsky's idea of scaffolding which is when practitioners support children just enough to help them progress while still allowing them to remain in control of their play.

Self-directed play also promotes inclusion this is because it is holistic, open-ended and adaptable, it allows children with diverse needs to participate in ways that feel comfortable and meaningful. Practitioners can tailor resources, adjust the environment, and provide individualised support to ensure every child can engage successfully. This approach promotes confidence, independence, and a strong sense of belonging within the setting (Murphy, 2025).

In conclusion children freely choosing and directing their own play is important as it creates a sense of self, supports curiosity, resilience, and creativity, while giving children the freedom to learn in ways that are meaningful and suitable for them. A practitioner's role is equally important as through creating rich learning environments, observing from a distance, and offering suitable support, gives children the skills to grow and succeed in life (Brown *et al.*, 2020).

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Section 3

Observation is defined by West Sussex County Council (n.d.) as professionals watching and listening to children, understanding the meaning of behaviour, and using this information to build a true picture of each child's strengths, interests, needs, and emerging skills. This usually occurs in a natural and uninterrupted way so practitioners can fully understand how each child learns, develops, and experiences the world. Practitioners can work closely with parents to learn about each child's learning needs, identifying further interests and understand family background. This shared information helps practitioners plan the next steps in supporting the child's learning and development (Neaum, 2016). Children's progress can be assessed through observations this is why they are important in early years and is why the Curriculum for Wales have made observation central to the curriculum to ensure each and every child is supported so they can reach their full potential (Welsh Government, 2025).

One observation type I am going to discuss is visual observation which is using photographs and videos to document and evidence children's learning and development. Practitioners take images or videos of children during play and exploration and document what the child is doing, how they are engaging, and which skills are being used (Sharman et al., 2015). These images can highlight fine motor development, problem solving, social interaction, emotions and facial expression. As photographs and videos can be taken discreetly, meaning the practitioner does not disrupt the child's play, making them a useful tool for capturing and documenting learning as it naturally happens (University of Plymouth, n.d.).

A benefit of visual observation in early childhood practice is its ability to capture authentic evidence of children's learning. Kurt (2019) suggests photographs and videos document real, natural moments of play, they highlight some details that are often missed in the fast-paced environments of early years, such as facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and the sequence of a child's actions. These extra details allow practitioners to analyse learning more deeply and more accurately, supporting a stronger understanding of each child's communication style, problem-solving skills, social interactions, and emotional responses (Belinda, 2011). According to Kurt (2019) visual observation also strengthens reflective practice as practitioners can revisit the footage multiple times, noticing new things each time

they view and use this information to plan, assess, and improve the environment. Another benefit is the way visual evidence improves communication with families. Childminding Support Team (2015) highlights that photos and videos make learning visible, helping parents understand not only what their child is doing, but how they are thinking, exploring, and developing. This supports stronger partnerships between parents and practitioners and ensure the best decisions are being made around the child's needs. Visual observation also aligns closely with child-centred practice, as it documents what the child chooses to do, what interests they have, and how they engage with the environment.

However, visual observation can also have some limitations, Childminding Support Team (2015) argue that a photo or video does not reflect every area of learning as it is only a brief moment within the day and does not fully show what the child was doing or their abilities. Another limitation is that some children may notice the camera and act differently as they know they are having a photo or video taken which doesn't give a true representation of how that child was playing, learning or their abilities this is supported with research by Complex Needs (n.d.). Kurt, G. (2019) mentions ethical considerations and how important it is to keep documents safe, misuse or insecure storage of photos and videos can compromise children's privacy and safety, so it is essential for practitioners to store images securely and follow the strict rules of safeguarding, ensure parents give consent, and data-protection policies so it does not lead to bad situations.

Visual observation on its own is not holistic as it only shows a small moment of time. Louis, S. (2021) highlights that photographs and videos can show many areas of learning, but it does not go into greater details than what you can see, overlooking the moments before and after the image that led to the child making the choice, imagination and problem solving. This shows visual observation cannot be used on its own, it should be used with other strategies, such as written notes and reflection to make sure the practitioner has a better and more holistic understanding of the child and their development (Smidt, 2015).

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Section 4

Play is important throughout observation and assessment because it gives practitioners the most natural and accurate view of how young children learn (Brodie, n.d.). When children play, they follow their own ideas and interests, which means practitioners can see genuine behaviours and skills that may not appear in adult-led tasks. UNICEF & The LEGO Foundation (2018) emphasise that play should sit at the heart of early learning, as it allows practitioners to understand each child's individual needs, developmental stage and progress and well-being. By watching children in play, practitioners can gather meaningful information about their development and use this to plan responsive, child-centred experiences that support the four purposes of the curriculum (Welsh Government, 2020).

Kurt (2019) highlights that observing children in familiar, natural environments allows practitioners to gather authentic information about development. Play provides a window into children's thinking, problem-solving, social interaction and emotional regulation. Because play is self-chosen and meaningful, children are more likely to demonstrate their true capabilities rather than behaviours shaped by adult expectations. This makes play a powerful context for assessment, enabling practitioners to build a holistic understanding of each child's needs, strengths and interests.

Howard and McInnes (2013) deepen this understanding by showing that children's engagement and performance change depending on whether they see an activity as play or work. When children view an activity as play, they are more confident, creative and willing to take risks. They show higher levels of independence and engagement, which leads to richer and more accurate observations. In contrast, when children interpret an activity as work, they may become cautious, less exploratory and less able to demonstrate their full potential. Howard and McInnes (2013) suggest that observations carried out during play are more likely to reflect a child's genuine developmental stage.

CoramPACEY (2025) recognises that young children have an internal drive to explore and play, and this makes play the most effective context for observation and assessment. When children are deeply engaged in play, they show their real interests, behaviours, well-being and ways of learning, which helps practitioners

build a more accurate and holistic understanding of each child. Because play is child-led and meaningful, observations do not always need to be formal or planned, they can happen naturally as children interact with their environment. This supports more reliable assessment because the child is relaxed, motivated and acting on their own ideas rather than responding to adult direction. By observing children in play, practitioners gain insight into what each child can do independently, how they engage with others, and what support or next steps they may need, making play-based observation central to accurate, responsive assessment in the early years (Smidt, 2015).

The Curriculum for Wales puts play-based observation at the centre of early years practice, recognising that children show their thinking, creativity, resilience, language, physical skills and social development most clearly when they are engaged in meaningful play, this is supported with research by Whitebread et al., (2017). When practitioners observe children in play, they gain a more accurate picture of their progress because the child is relaxed, motivated and acting on their own ideas rather than responding to adult-led tasks. Using this information, practitioners can plan rich indoor and outdoor environments that reflect each child's interests, background and abilities, helping them to learn at their own pace. By creating safe, inclusive and challenging play opportunities, and by knowing when to step back and when to sensitively support, practitioners encourage deeper engagement, which in turn leads to more reliable observations. This responsive, play-based approach ensures that assessment is continuous, child-centred and aligned with the Curriculum for Wales aim of helping children become capable, confident learners (Welsh Government, 2024).

In conclusion, play is fundamental to effective observation and assessment because it provides the most authentic information and evidence for understanding young children. Research shows that children show their true capabilities more effectively in play than in adult-directed tasks, making play-based observation essential for a more true and accurate assessment of the children. When practitioners stand back, listen carefully, understand development, create enabling environments and observe objectively, they are able to support children's progress in ways that align with the principles and expectations of the Curriculum for Wales. Therefore, play-based observation not only leads to more accurate and meaningful assessment in the early

years, but also strengthens a practitioners professional practice, enabling them to provide the support needed to help each child thrive (Brodie, n.d.).

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