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Section 1

What is play?

The understanding of Play has many layers, and its meaning changes with context. However, some cores are always visible:

It is an activity that players freely choose and control.

An activity that is done for the inherent fun, not for rewards.

An activity with rules that exist in the player's mind.

An activity that involves creativity and imagination.

An activity is done while active, alert, and relatively stress-free.

Play is a process and not a product. It is a dynamic and fluid experience shaped by individual interests, abilities, and social context. For children play is a fundamental way of learning and developing social, cognitive, and physical skills. It is how they explore and make sense of the world (PsychologyToday, 2022).

While play encompasses numerous forms, I will focus on physical and imaginative play.

Physical play activities

It involves movement and interaction with the environment. Parents play a key role through modeling and encouragement. It encompasses a wide range of activities that get children moving. Whether it is running and jumping or manipulating small objects. This type of play is crucial for building strength, improving coordination, and fostering social skills. Some examples of physical play include jumping rope, riding a bike, climbing, swimming, ball games, swinging, dancing, and hula hooping (WebFX, 2012).

Physical play is crucial for children's healthy development. A child needs at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity. Play enhances physical capabilities, coordination, strength, cardiovascular, fitness, motor skills, and spatial awareness. It also refines hand-eye coordination, dexterity, and sensory exploration through activities like molding clay or scribbling. Also, outdoor play provides unique sensory experiences, fostering a deeper appreciation of nature.

Children need physical play to grow in every way. It develops their physical abilities (running, drawing, healthy body), cognitive skills (talking, sharing, getting along), and emotional strength (confidence, managing feelings, bouncing back).

Physical play is vital for developing children's gross motor skills, improving their coordination and balance, and fostering social skills (Anon, n.d, CPDonline College,2024, Robinson,2023).

Benefits

- Making them believe in themselves and what they can do.
- Boosting their confidence.
- Teaching them how to get along with others, both children and adults.
- Improving their social skills and making them more independent and able to make choices.
- Making them curious about the world.
- Teaching them how to handle challenging situations in a way that's right for their age (Online Learning College, 2022).

Stages of play

- Unoccupied play (0-3 months) Baby explores body movements.
- Solitary play (0-2 years) Child plays alone.
- Spectator play (2 years) Child watches others play but doesn't join in.
- Parallel play (2+ years) Children play near each other but separately.
- Associate play (3-4 years) Children play together loosely but not cooperatively.
- Cooperative play (4+ years) Children play together with shared goals (Pathways, 2019).

How physical play can be supported in practice?

We should create a safe and engaging environment to support physical play in practice. This means offering diverse spaces, both indoors and outdoors, with varying surfaces, textures, and equipment. Practitioners should Provide a variety of materials like balls, hoops, blocks, scarres, and tunnels to inspire movement and exploration. Also showing children you love to play, joining in, and having fun with them is important.

Practitioners should help children build important skills, fine motor skills, balance, and coordination(Admin, 2025).

Piaget's theory of play

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist who is known for his groundbreaking work in child development, was born in 1849. Piaget's theory of play provides a valuable framework for understanding how play contributes to children's cognitive development.

How Play Contribute to children's Cognitive development

Piaget theorized that children move through four stages of cognitive development. The sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages.

His theory is closely linked to physical play, especially in the early stages. His theory included four stages. The first stage (sensorimotor play) heavily involves physical exploration and movement, as infants use their bodies to interact with the world. Even in later stages, physical activity remains important, for example, preoperational children may engage in physical pretend play like running and chasing while imagining they are superheroes (Admin, 2025, Burgemeester, 2016).

Imagination play

Imagination play is a type of play where children use their imagination to create and act out various scenarios. It is a natural and essential part of childhood. It allows children to make sense of the world around them, develop crucial skills, and have fun while doing it. An example of imagination play is play house or restaurant, acting out stories with toys (Spivey, 2022, Sets, 2019).

Benefits: All ages benefit, from safe exploration, build independence, prepare for real life, develop empathy, and boost social skills. Expands language, teaches problem-solving, sparks creativity, and strengthens bonds (Counting To Ten, n.d.).

How imaginative play can be supported in practice?

To foster imaginative play, practitioners should create a stimulating environment with open-ended toys, designated play areas, and natural materials. Actively participate in children's play, ask open-ended questions, and offer gentle suggestions. They should provide ample unstructured playtime, limit screen time, and ensure safe space. Connect with their interests by observing their play. They also should value children's creativity and experimentation (Davis, 2011).

Vygotsky theory

Vygotsky's theory aligns with play's natural progress. The early play explores objects, preparing for imaginative play. This emerges as children create scenarios and use symbolic props, reflecting Vygotsky's focus on symbolic thought and social rules. Cooperative play then develops with shared pretend scenarios boosting social skills, language, and perspective-taking, all Vygotsky priorities (Admin 2025, Elaine,2024).

Section 2

What is self-directed play?

Self-directed play is a form of play where children are given the freedom to play in their way, without any set rules or adult direction.

It is play that is: their choice: they decide what to play and how.

Their way: they follow their ideas and interests.

Self-motivated: they play in their way for their reasons(playAdventures,n.d.)

Self-directed play is a type of learning that happens when children explore their interests without being told what to do. They are gaining some knowledge but not all the details, which encourages learning by playing and gives them more control.

Simple creative play with basic toys often indicates self-directed play, a Montessori principle.

Self-directed play has several key features: it is spontaneous, starting from a child's ideas. It is open-ended, with no set goals or limits. It is flexible, changing as a child's interests evolve. And it is meaningful, deeply engaging, and relevant to the individual child. It is a fundamental way that children learn and make sense of the world around them. It allows children to develop creativity, problem-solving skills, social skills, emotional intelligence, and a sense of self. Children are natural experts at play. They thrive on creativity in their world and stories. This freedom is essential.

Self-directed play lets kids choose how to play making their own rules for example loose parts play, using open-ended materials for creative play and problem-solving.

Free play unlocks deeper learning and self-directed play gives kids voice and independence. It shows they are active community members.

Children benefit from extended and repeated play with the same materials. Instead of directing their play, adults should foster, this exploration through questions and observations (Ashton,2021).

Self-directed play builds independence and confidence. It helps children become self-reliant by giving them the power to choose in a safe space. This sense of control makes them more invested in their learning.

When children are free to follow their interests in self-directed play, they become more engaged and motivated. This intrinsic motivation fosters a deeper, more meaningful learning experience driven by genuine curiosity and a love of exploration.

This also helps them take charge of their learning. They do not become experts on everything, but they learn how to learn. They explore, discover, learn, and pursue their interests and learn from both successes and failures. By leading their play, useful skills, and knowledge(Ledendecker,2020).

Self-directed play provides a rich environment for learning that unfolds naturally. Through play, children develop essential skills like problem-solving, creativity, and social competence in a way that feels effortless and fun, this organic approach to learning is not only more effective in the long run but also cultivates a lifelong love of

learning, unlike the often less engaging experience of structured, adult-led activities (The Stinner Connection, 2022).

How can adults support self-directed play?

Children are natural learners, but too much adult direction hinders them. Adults should create environments reflecting individual interests. Instead, observe their questions, fascinations, or observations, and offer provocations to fuel their ideas. This builds motivation and engagement. Also listening and following their lead empowers children to take risks, learn, and direct their learning (www.hyggeintheearlyyears.co.uk.n.d.).

Also, adults can support self-directed play by:

- **Creating a safe and stimulating environment:** Provide diverse, open-ended materials (blocks, art supplies, dress-up clothes, natural items, age-appropriate tools) in a flexible and adaptable space. Foster an accepting atmosphere where children feel safe to take risks, make mistakes, and express themselves.
- **Observe and learn:** Adults should observe children's play without interrupting, allowing them to lead and choose activities. Intervention is only necessary for safety. By patterns and social interactions, adults gain insights into children's development and can provide more effective support.
- **Offer support when needed:** When children struggle during play, adults should offer gentle guidance, suggestions, or open-ended questions, supporting their problem-solving rather than providing direct answers. When invited, adults can extend learning by building on existing knowledge and helping children make connections.
- **Respect choices:** Adults should respect children's play choices, valuing their ideas even if the play is messy or unconventional. They should give children the freedom to explore their interests without judgment or criticism, focusing on the process of their play, not on the final product.
- **Encourage reflection:** Adults can encourage reflection on a play by discussing the experience with children. They can ask what children did, how they felt, and what they learned. Photos or videos can document the play and help promote further conversation. Engaging with them showing interest, and

valuing their efforts. Being present and showing their
care (Amin, 2022, playlikemum, 2023, Rymanowicz, 2015).

Section 3

What is observation?

Observation in early childhood means carefully watching and listening to children to understand their development, learning, and needs.

It involves recording factual actions and words and noting behaviors, interactions, and responses to different situations (Froebel Trust, n.d).

Why is it important?

Observation is crucial. It is a continuous cycle of observing, reflecting, documenting, planning, acting, and assessing, ultimately keeping the child at the center of practice.

It helps educators understand children's interests, motivations, and communication styles. It allows educators to plan appropriate activities, improve the learning environment, track progress, identify special needs, and guide each child's development. It is valuable to have insight into a child's progress, strengths, challenges, and interactions with the world around them (Azilotraining, 2021, Machan, 2016, Speeuwenberg, 2022).

The early years foundation stage (EYFS) prioritizes effective teaching and a strong curriculum over simply gathering a large amount of evidence. Observation is key to understanding each child's unique development, which informs personalized learning and curriculum planning. These observations also foster strong parent partnerships by sharing insights and encouraging collaboration between the home and the nursery (Connect Childcare, 2024).

Learning stories observation method

Learning stories are a vital tool in early childhood education, providing a narrative-based way to document and interpret a child's learning. These engaging stories, often enhanced with photos, highlight a child's strengths and abilities across various

development domains, fostering a holistic understanding of their progress. Unlike clinical observations, learning stories aim to truly understand a child's experiences and thinking by focusing on key learning moments and incorporating diverse perspectives from educators, families, and the children themselves. Strong learning stories include: linked titles, captioned photos, a personal narrative, reflective learning analysis, activity planning, and family contributions. They encourage genuine inquiry and enhance learning rather than simply tracking milestones. This approach facilitates communication, and collaboration between educators, parents, and children, creating a shared understanding of learning. Families are also encouraged to contribute their observations from home, enriching the stories. When learning stories, educators adopt a friendly, storytelling style, using a first-person perspective and interpreting the child's experiences (ESCAMILLA, 2021).

Benefits:

Highlights patterns in behavior:

Learning stories can be a valuable tool for revealing behavioral patterns in children. Detailed learning stories help educators identify recurring patterns in children's behavior. Input from educators and families provides a broader view of behavior in different contexts. Reflecting on these stories allows educators to understand the underlying causes of behavior. Over time these records show how a child's behavior evolves, revealing changes and emerging patterns (ESCAMILLA, 2021).

Tracks social development:

Learning stories effectively track social development by providing detailed narratives of children's interactions within specific contexts. This allows educators to identify patterns, highlight strengths, and understand areas for growth. Sharing these stories with families fosters collaboration and a comprehensive view of the child's social skills. The reflective process of writing these stories also informs future planning and captures the child's unique perspective through direct quotes (ESCAMILLA, 2021).

Monitor language development:

Unlike standardized tests, learning stories offer a unique way to monitor language development by documenting natural language use in real-life situations. They capture specific examples of vocabulary, sentence structure, and conversation, including direct quotes, offering a rich picture of a child's language over time. It offers a holistic view of language acquisition by examining communication, development patterns, and family collaboration(ESCAMILLA, 2021).

Limitation

Time-consuming:

Creating through learning stories demands significant demands significant time. Educators must write a detailed account of each child's experiences, reflect on their learning, and plan future activities.

Personalizing these stories for each child adds to the workload. Incorporating photos and videos, while beneficial, further extends the process.

Large numbers of children per staff member in early years setting create time constraints, hindering the comprehensive observation and documentation needed for learning stories (Care Learning, 2025, Early Years Career, 2016).

Possible missed details:

Learning stories are subjective and influenced by the educators's perspective leading to potential missions or biases. Busy early years settings can cause educators to miss details, human memory is unreliable, language choices can alter interpretations, and focusing solely on "learning moments" can neglect overall development. The observer's emotions and distractions can also impact the accuracy(Care Learning, 2025, Early Years Career, 2016).

Limited context:

Individual learning stories provide a snapshot of a child's development but lack the broader context of their daily life. To gain a complete understanding, consistent observation across settings is needed. Environmental, social, and emotional factors, as well as the home context, which significantly influences behavior, are often overlooked (Care Learning, 2025, Early Years Career, 2016).

Learning stories aim for a holistic child view, capturing development across social, cognitive, physical, and language domains. However, subjectivity, limited context, focus on specific moments, and time constraints can hinder this. To achieve a holistic view, educators should observe in varied settings, include multiple perspectives, use diverse documentation, regularly review stories, and incorporate input from all caregivers and at home(ESCAMILLA, 2021, Froebel Trust, n.d).

Section 4

Why is play important when observing and assessing children?

Play is essential for observing and assisting children for several interconnected reasons:

- play is a child's natural language: It is their primary way of expressing themselves. It allows them to explore their environment, experiment with ideas and process experiences authentically
- play offers concrete evidence of development progress: Children naturally demonstrate their skills and abilities within the context of play. Whether building with blocks, engaging in imaginative play, or solving puzzles, their actions reveal the development of their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional skills.
- play fosters intrinsic motivation: Children are naturally drawn to play. Observation during these activities is less intrusive and more likely to capture genuine behaviors and abilities. This natural engagement reduces performance anxiety that can sometimes occur in more structured assessment situations.
- play provides learning opportunities: play is not only a tool for assessment, but also a powerful engine for learning. Through play, children develop essential skills, build confidence, and make sense of the world around them. Observing their play allows educators to identify areas where they might need additional support or enrichment.

- play offers insights into individual differences: Each child has a unique play style. By observing their preferences interactions with peers and approaches to challenges. Educators gain valuable information about their personalities, learning styles, and individual strengths (Lillio.com,2021).

Observing children during play is a reliable method for assessing their development. This is because play acts as a natural outlet, allowing children to demonstrate their genuine skills in an uninhabited environment, unlike formal assessment. Play offers a comprehensive view of a child's development, revealing cognitive abilities like problem-solving, and social skills such as cooperation, emotional expression, and physical coordination. Furthermore, play provides a real-world context, showcasing how children apply their knowledge in practical situations. This approach is supported by established developmental theories, the practices of early childhood professionals, and numerous research studies. (birth to 5 Matters,2021)

Also, children change their behavior. When they know they are being observed, a phenomenon called the “observe effect” can skew developmental assessments. To counteract this, observers should use techniques like getting children used to their presence, watching them in natural settings, joining their play, or employing less obvious observation methods. Awareness of this effect is vital for accurate interpretation of observation. Consistent observation in various settings, along with knowledge of each child’s personality, are essential for a reliable developmental understanding (Rosa,2015).

How can adults support their children?

Understanding children:

A deep understanding of child development is vital for adults conducting observation and assessments. The knowledge allows for accurate interpretation of behavior through recognition of milestones, application of theories, and respect for individual differences. Adults can then choose suitable assessment methods, document observation effectively, and consider all aspects of a child’s life. This

ensures ethical practices and practical adjustments, leading to meaningful assessments that support the child's development (Care Learning, 2025, ESCAMILLA, 2021).

Creating environment :

Supportive environments significantly improve child observation and assessment. By offering stimulating, safe spaces for natural play and interaction, adults allow children to freely show their abilities. Meaningful observations are aided by unobtrusive setups, open-ended activities, and an understanding of the context. Adults can also use the environment for assessment through strategic documentation, environmental cases, and reflection. This ensures children naturally reveal their skills, leading to accurate assessments that promote their well-being (Care Learning, 2025, ESCAMILLA, 2021).

Howard and McInnes

Simply providing toys or spaces for play is not sufficient. Research, including studies by Howard and McInnes, demonstrates that children's happiness hinges on their perception of an activity as play. We must shift our focus from merely observing their actions to understanding their perspectives. It's not just a feel-good thing; children's health and happiness are legally protected rights. When children thrive, they are better equipped to face life's challenges. We all agree play is beneficial but defining it consistently for research is difficult. However, children have a way of recognizing play, and when they perceive an activity as play, it enhances their cognitive abilities. "A study with 129 kids, aged about four to five, found that when they thought they were playing with beads and puzzles, they were much happier. It proves that how kids feel about an activity is super important. Simply providing toys is not enough. Practitioners require training that goes beyond simply providing play opportunities. They need to learn to adopt a child's perspective, moving beyond just observing actions. They need to learn to see things from a kid's point of view, not just focus on what the kids are doing. The training should not be about "Here are the different kinds of play," it should be about "How do we help kids feel that sense of playfulness?" training should emphasize play as a process, highlighting the importance of perceived play in children's well-being. Practitioners should learn to reflect on the "playfulness" of the experiences. They offer and create spaces where kids feel that magic(Howard and McInnes,2013).

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