

The United Nations Convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC, 2024) states on Article 31 that all children have the right to play and take part in a wide range of different activities and experiences in life.

Brodie (2018) suggests that children learn holistically through choosing what they want to do. This means that children have the opportunity and independence to choose what they want to do. Brodie (2018) believes that play is to promote motivation, willingness, and enthusiasm which are all fundamental factors of holistic learning. Play Scotland (2025) suggests that a child that has that opportunity to play from childhood will help contribute to their well-being in their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Play Scotland (2025) states that play in early childhood has had a big effect on the way a child's brain develops. Furthermore, Play Scotland (2025) suggests that all play in Early Childhood helps the child build strong bones, and muscle strength, they do this by using their physical skills in different ways that with further help them develop skills and coordinated movements. According to Brodie (2024), Mildred Parten's theory of the six stages of play are Unoccupied Play, Solitary Play, Onlooker Play, Parallel Play, Associative Play, and Cooperative Play. Brodie (2024) summarizes Parten's six stages of play as follows. Unoccupied Play which is Birth to 3 months. This is when the child has random movements, beginning to have more control over their body movements. For example, Brodie (2024) says that a baby lying down and kicking their legs and waving their arms in the air develops their physical development. The second stage of play is Solitary Play which is 3 months to 2 and a half years. This is where the child's independence comes into play; they have little interest in associating themselves with other children or adults. In this stage, children are solely focused on play and their own activities and could be completely oblivious to others around them. Onlooker play which is 2 and a half to 3 and a half. Where children are beginning to observe others playing but not wanting to join in yet. They start to develop curiosity and ask questions about the play. This helps the child's social cues and play behavior. Next is Parallel Play which is 3 and a half to 4. According to Rymanowicz (2015) this is where the child plays alongside others without direct interaction. This shows that the child is beginning to acknowledge others while playing alongside them. Associative Play which is 4 to 5 and a half.

This is where the child is beginning to interact more during play, sharing and talking through what they are playing with or doing. According to Brodie (2024), this helps them start to develop social and communication skills. Lastly is Cooperative Play which is 4 and a half and up. This is where children begin to work together to achieve the same goal; they begin to roleplay with others in different scenarios.

When thinking of types of play, two that happen regularly is Physical play and Imaginary Play (Roleplay). According to Waters-Davies (2022) physical play is beneficial to a child's development and is fundamental to give the child experiences for them to learn and develop in. For example, in my setting physical development is encouraged through P.E sessions, outdoor play and sensory circuits. To support this in practice, it is important to provide equipment for both indoors and outdoor activities such as tyres, blocks, hula hoops, etc. Consistency with the sensory circuits to be able to see the physical development develop. Sprouts (2018) video discusses Piagets theory where they state that children's play environments should change as they develop and grow up. They state that Piaget argues that physical play is essential for a child's cognitive development; this helps the children to be able to understand and explore the physical world. Imaginary play according to Waters-Davies (2022) is an important part of a child's development. Children tend to role-play family members, teachers or job roles. It allows children to explore different characters, which could be through body language, tone of voice, or facial expressions. In my setting, we have a room which is set up for roleplay where the kids can dress up and use loose parts. Sprouts (2020) emphasizes how Vygotsky's theory helps develop communication, understanding, and in some cases self-regulation. Vygotsky argues that Imaginary play helps the child's cognitive, social and emotional growth. It helps them create imaginary settings, imagine different roles, and follow rules.

Part 2 -

In this section it will be discussed what self-directed play is and how us as adults and teaching staff can support the children in that environment. It will be discussed how children can develop different life skills when playing and why self-directed play is important in early years.

Edmentum (2024) states that self-directed play helps children develop different skills such as creativity, social, and problem solving; it helps the children develop curiosity of the world around them. St Andrews (2021) believes that self-directed and child led play helps develop the whole child. They believe that it helps their cognitive skills, emotional and social skills, and their physical skills. St Andrews (2021) states that the children begin to become aware of the world around them, how it works and why it works that way, they learn to take healthy risks, they start to enjoy the thrill of being able to enquire about their creative ideas. Government Wales (2024) states that self-directed play is child-chosen, self-directed and is essential in the Early years. Gov Wales (2024) believes that self-directed play supports the pedagogical principles that have been set out in the new curriculum in Wales. They believe that self-chosen play builds the child's resilience, independence and well-being, supports the child's rights and supports the four purposes within the Curriculum for Wales.

According to the Curriculum for Wales (2025) practitioners who work in Early years are known as enabling adults. They define enabling adults as people who create engaging and inviting experiences that support a child's holistic development, rights, and their well-being. According to the Education Endowment Foundation (2023), adults must set up an enabling environment for the children to want to take part and engage and participate in those activities. Play Wales (2023) states that adults have the responsibility to ensure that children have freedom, space, and the time to play and explore. Play Wales (2023) believes that when adults participate and show interest in children's play, they get more understanding of the child and what their likes and dislikes are, and how the child plays. They explain that children benefit from activities that involve adults, even if it is just there in the background offering low intervention support. Furthermore, Play Wales (2023) discusses that there are several benefits of play, but those benefits could begin to reduce if adults' control and get involved in their play, as it undermines a child's attempt to be independent, lead and organize their self-directed play. King (2025) discusses how the play cycle and the role of the adult are similar. According to King (2025), the role of the adult when supporting the child in their play is to support them. This is usually offered through low intervention observations, without interrupting their play. The Children's Scrapstore (2013) states that the play

cycle is used by professionals such as practitioners and playworkers to help observe and understand play. Practitioners use the play cycle as part of their everyday practice to help understand the children better and to put interventions into play to help better and support it further. According to King and Newstead (2021), the play cycle consists of six different but similar components. Those components are Meta-lude, which is the initial thought or idea; they want to play but not initiate it. Play-cue where the child has intent to play signals and invite friends and teachers. Play return, which is where another child responds to the invite from the other child. The loop and flow are how that play cue is processed. The play frame is where there are rules being established. Lastly Annihilation where the play naturally ends by them going elsewhere or walking away (King and Newstead 2021).

According to the Montessori school of Berkshire (2020), the children's self-directed play is a very important part of their development; it helps build the child as a person. It allows them to develop self-confidence, and to explore the world on their own terms. It allows the child to build their independence by helping them grow and learn in the outside world. To build on this, the raising children's network (2019) states that play is important for a child's learning and development. They state that it supports a child's development through the emotional, social, physical, and cognitive aspects all at once. It allows their brain to build in more ways than one. Montessori (2020) believes that self-directed play allows children to learn at their own pace, with no timeline or pressure, only the child building on their own knowledge and understanding and having the motivation and drive to find things out for themselves.