

ECEY4003

Section 1

Play is difficult to define because it is subjective, and as unique as the child who is playing. Therefore, “play has never been universally defined...” (Reed and Brown, 2000, p.104).

Murray (2018) agrees that there is no universally recognised definition of play.

Play is intrinsically motivated, and the right to play is outlined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

There are many different types of play. Hughes (1996) categorised play into sixteen types; communication play, creative play, deep play, dramatic play, exploratory play, fantasy play, imaginative play, locomotor play, mastery play, object play, recapitulative play, role play, rough and tumble play, social play, socio-dramatic play, and symbolic play. Other scholars have also attempted to classify children’s play. Parten (1933) believed that children moved through six stages of play; starting with solitary play, then moving on to spectator play at approximately 24-30 months, then parallel play at approximately 30-36 months, then associative play at approximately 36- 48 months, before finally engaging in cooperative play from approximately 48-72 months.

Play is multifaceted, it is not possible to define play as just one thing. Whatever the play that infants or children are engaged in, this play is holistic, and will be influencing and informing their knowledge and understanding of the world around them.

Adventurous play, sometimes referred to as risky play, or referred to as deep play by Bob Hughes (Hughes, 1996), is exciting play that has risks attached to it. There is the potential for children to become injured physically, which is often why children have limited opportunities to engage in adventurous play. Children’s opportunities to engage in risky play have diminished over recent decades because adults have assumed that they need to protect children “from the dangers of the world” (Kvalnes, O. Hansen Sandseter, E.B. 2023).

Practitioners are often reluctant to enable adventurous play, as they are concerned about potential injury or the perception of negligence.

Sandseter (2007) identified 8 types of risky play; play at heights, play at speed, play with dangerous tools or items, play near a dangerous environment, play without adult supervision, rough and tumble play, play with impact, and vicarious play.

Risky play has significant benefits for children's physical development, allowing them to perfect physical skills, and foster an awareness of their own limits and boundaries. Risky play also enables children to learn resilience through dealing with challenges, thus having a positive impact on their mental health and well being as they gain confidence and become independent through their autonomy of their choices. (Kvalnes, O. Hansen Sandeter, E.B. 2003). Risky play can help to reduce childhood anxiety (Dodd, H.F. 2021)

Through risky play, children may exhibit the characteristics of effective learning, as they explore, think critically and persevere through difficulties (Department for Education, 2023). Adults can support children in risky play by providing opportunities to take risks and make decisions. Adults also need to ensure that children are having opportunities to be physically active, in order to ensure that they are healthy and getting to practice physical skills. Early years children should be active for a minimum of 3 hours every day (UK Chief Medical Officer, 2019).

Sensory play is play that stimulates the senses of touch, sight, taste, smell or hearing. Sensory play may stimulate all of the senses, some of the senses, or just one of the senses. Infants and children use their senses to explore the world around them, so sensory play is a good way to support their development and understanding of the world. Sensory play can support brain development, as sensory experiences can stimulate neural growth, forming connections.

Infants undergo a period of rapid neural growth and connection, known as blooming. (Thompson, 2001)

Sensory play can help children to begin to comprehend the connection between cause and effect, by noticing how their actions impact the world around them, as well as supporting physical development, through practising their fine motor skills. Sensory play can also encourage creativity and independence, as well as support language development, communication and social skills. (Action for Children, 2022).

Similarly to risky play, through sensory play, children may exhibit the characteristics of effective learning, as they explore, concentrate on a stimulus, and start to make links between ideas (Department for Education, 2023).

Children may have a special educational need or disability, including sensory sensitivity, which may affect their enjoyment of sensory play. Sensory activities can be adapted to meet the needs of individual children.

Adults can support sensory play by providing a range of sensory activities. Sensory play may not be available if the adults dislike potential mess or fail to appreciate the benefits of sensory play.

Section 2

The Early Years Statutory Framework is clear on the importance of play for children's learning and development, describing play as "essential" (Department for Education, 2003, p.17). The Early Years Statutory Framework also details how in addition to learning that is guided by adults, it is also important that children lead their own play, in order to build their confidence, and to set their own goals and solve their own problems. (Department for Education, 2003, p.17). Brown (2003) agrees that self-directed play is beneficial, and that enabling children to be in control of their play, increases their confidence and self-esteem. Gray (2013) agrees with Brown (2003) and considers the positive impact on children of recognising their competence to learn through their own exploration, and to enable children to feel valued and heard.

Murray (2018) discusses how free play has become increasingly compromised and is clear that the role of early childhood educators is crucial if free play is to be valued and children afforded the benefits of free play. Murray believes that knowledgeable early childhood educators are essential.

Vygotsky developed a theory about how social interactions and relationships influence children's cognitive development. Vygotsky believed that children could learn through their play if this was supported by adults (Nilsson and Ferholt, 2014). Vygotsky believed that through play, children attempted to "gain mastery over his or her destiny and function within the culture" (Reed and Brown, 2000, p.104).

The Early Years Statutory Framework (2023) talks about "enabling environments" and one of the overarching principles is that children learn through a mix of approaches, including play. McInnes, K. et al. (2011) agree that the role of adults in facilitating play and enabling

learning is key, noting that a pedagogy founded on play and learning, and facilitated by the practitioner appears to be beneficial (McInnes, K. et al. , 2011, p. 131).

Early years practitioners can use scaffolding to support children's learning through play. This may be modelling a skill, or use of language, or asking open ended questions. The practitioner then supports the child to have a go, then withdraws support unless it is still required.

Section 3

Observation is a key tool for early years practitioners to enable them to understand what stage of learning and development a child is at, and what support is needed to further their learning. Early years practitioners can use their knowledge of typical child development to consider if a child is making typical development for a child of their age, or if the child may have a special educational need or disability, and require specialist support. Early years practitioners can also use observation to identify the current interests and needs of the child, to enable them to ensure that the environment, resources and activities are of interest to the child. The Early Years Statutory Framework (2023) states that children learn and develop well in enabling environments, where the adults respond to their individual interests.

According to Fawcett and Watson (2016), observation is not just about noticing and recording what a child is doing but respecting and valuing their explorations and opinions. There are several different observation methods that early years practitioners can use to observe a child. Practitioners could use movement trackers, or time trackers to record how long a child spends on a self-chosen activity, or which areas of the provision the child chooses to access. Practitioners could also use tools such as the Leuven scale, to consider a child's emotional well-being and involvement in the setting or during activities. Other observation methods include Schedule of Growing Skills, which can highlight potential areas of strength or weakness, and online systems, such as Tapestry and Early Years Log.

Another observation method is the narrative observation, also known as a running record or written observation. This requires the early years practitioner to note down what the child does and says. Sometimes observations may also include a photograph of the child playing, or of what they have made. Video observations can also record a child's play. Having a written record to reflect on the child's play, speech or interactions can be useful to reflect

upon later. Reflective practice is important for early years practitioners, to ensure that their practice continually evolves and that opportunities for further learning are taken.

Written observations can be shared with parents or carers, to support home learning and to share a child's achievements or interests. Written observations can also be used to aid with assessment. Written observations can give a more holistic view of the child, as they detail everything that was said or done, opposed to observation methods such as movement trackers or time trackers, that record more limited information.

When completing written observations, it is important that early years practitioners are factual and refrain from recording their opinion. Fawcett and Watson (2016) discuss the need for early years practitioners to consider their own subjectivity when observing children.

Section 4

Howard and McInnes (2012) conducted a study which demonstrated how children showed more signs of emotional well-being when they perceived an activity to be play rather than when perceiving the same activity as not play, therefore it is important to observe children when they are engaged in play as well as when they are completing adult led activities in order to ensure that a true picture is obtained of the child. During play, children are often demonstrating the characteristics of effective learning, through playing, exploring, concentrating on their self-directed task, creating or thinking critically (Early Years Statutory Framework, 2023). It is also essential to ensure that a child's basic needs are met before observing them, to ensure an accurate representation. Maslow's Hierarchy of needs shows how it is not possible for children to fulfil their full potential if their basic needs are not met.

Early years practitioners need to assess the progress of children to best support their future learning and to keep parents and carers informed of their progress. The Early Years Statutory Framework (2023) states that strong partnerships with parents and carers benefit their child. Early years practitioners must complete a progress check at age 2, a baseline assessment at the start of Reception, and The Early Year Foundation Profile at the end of Reception. Assessment information should be used to enhance future learning and be shared with parents and carers.

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