

Children's Play: Theory and Practice (ECEY4003/C)

ECEY4003 assignment

Play for a child is one of the most important aspects of children's lives. This is because children value their opportunity to play as it brings them enjoyment and engagement with their friends. Play occurs whenever and wherever the opportunity arises and is controlled and self-directed by the child. The characteristics of play can be described as fun, uncertainty or risk taking, challenging, flexible and non-productive. Holistic play supports the child's socialising, resilience, health and wellbeing learning and development and their happiness (Play Wales 2022).

Inclusive play provides all children alone or with other to enjoy quality local play provision in a setting that supports their play needs. The Welsh Government believes that play is essential for a child's growth in mental, physical, social, and emotional development. In addition, the Welsh government made it a legal requirement for local authorities to assess their areas to ensure that there were enough opportunities for children to play. The Play Sufficiency Duty is to be carried out by local authorities every three years to ensure there is reasonable and practical opportunities for children to play in their local area (Play Wales 2022).

"Play affirms and stimulates children's creativity and nurtures the thinking outside the box" (Elkind 2015 p.8). This approach allows children to contribute their own ideas to the world through play. Children engaging in self-led, open ended play with practitioners, parents and other peers encourages a child to build strong foundations of later learning. Children will gain social skills, learn how to work well with others which is important for learning environments, at home and future school success in a holistic approach (Elkind *et al* 2015). This links in with Play Wales (2022) which supports the self-led approach learning to encourage a child's ability with developing social skills.

There are many types of play, they are described as Rational play, Symbolic play, Constructive play and Rough and Tumble play. These different types of play can combine different types of foundation skills that contribute to child focused learning and development through opportunity of play. Constructive play gives a child the experience to explore blocks, sand and paint to be able to be independently creative and create something self-led. These skills can follow through to relational play where there are objects provided to allow children to explore real life situations. An example of this is pouring water into a jug or stirring materials within cups or saucepans encouraging role play type material. This ongoing exposure to play materials support symbolic play. This type of play links in sand and pretend kitchens taking on the dramatic and pretend play. These types of play can be supported through self-led play or parallel play that occurs when a child engages in play alongside other children (Tag Vault 2023). Rough and tumble play links with Froebel (1826) theory that demonstrates the opportunity to allow a child to engage in risky play and explore playful physical actions. These stages of play also take a link into

the Jean Piaget's Theory of play used to understand the stages of children's development.

Communication play encourages the child to use words, gestures, whole body demonstration, facial expressions as well as use playful gestures like jokes, play acting, singing and poetry (Play Scotland 2022). Communication play is a key role in how children learn to communicate with others and how they express themselves confidently while taking turns and joining in group activities. If communication is undeveloped children are socially and emotionally difficult to manage. They will show signs of insecurity, signs of aggression, be noticeably reserved from the group and do not like sharing with others. Maintaining consistent communication by talking to them even if they do not talk back and listening to the child and responding with simple answers can help develop the beginning of a trusted relationship (UNICEF 2017).

Holistic approaches in early development and learning are recognising that there is different aspects connecting children's experiences. Through different enabling environments there is opportunity to break down the complexity of task through curiosity of learning and exploring materials and routine experiences. The use of effective communication and language by using gestures and words so a child can understand and use to express their own ideas to practitioner's can support connections in other places and opportunities (Birth To 5 Matters 2023).

Playful learning is a learning context that allows children to learning while playing freely, known as free play or self-directed play with the guidance of an adult or structures activities. Nurturing a child environment with natural curiosities for them to experiment, explore, problem solve and engage in meaningful activities maximises their learning whilst meeting their individual goals. Allowing a child to explore and express themselves in free play allows them to be the captain of their own ship and gives the adult the opportunities to observe the child's level of learning and ability. Playful learning pedagogies align with research of the science of learning that helps the human learn. Whilst the importance of free play is expressed, the ability for the adult to interact with the child appropriately leads to more powerful ways to increase learning (Zosh 2022).

Learning through play is created by the quality experience and opportunities that are created and nurtured when adults are supporting the process. The pedagogy has various roles of the adult and will differ thought the age rages and stages of child development adults are working with. The adult is the one that enables play to happen in their learning environments by providing resources and adapting the opportunities so that there is differentiation for each child and their ability to engage with the task. The role of the adult is to encourage self-directed play, however adults need to support and extend the children's learning by joining in sensitively when there is scope to do so. This leads into the responsibility to be pro-active with observation and determine the journey the child is experiencing and support difficulties they may be exposed to (Whalley 2019).

Adults need to have a creative mind and be a critical thinker to create their own ideas to support enabling environments to encourage children's participation in self-directed play. The adult needs to have the ability to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of tasks in their enabling environments. The skill to be able to adapt and grade tasks and activities whilst trying to develop and encouraging the learning ability of the child to be able to carry out tasks set for them. A practitioner should be able to organise environments, supply appropriate resources and offer opportunities that are appropriate in extending the child's learning (Birth To 5 Matter 2023).

Pedagogy or otherwise commonly known as 'the art of teaching' (K.McInnes *et al* ,2011, p.122) instructs many forms of formal direct instructions to early years provision to child's free play. Two very useful ways of viewing Pedagogy is classification and framing. Framing is described as the relationship between the practitioner and child and the level of control between them. If the frame is strong then the control rests with the practitioner. Whereas the classification refers to the boundaries between subjects. If there is a merge between subjects it highlight that the boundaries are weak (K.McInnes *et al*, 2011).

Child led play is supported by theorist such as Fredrick Frobel (1782-1852) and Maria Montessori (1870-1952) which both support that play is the work of the child's learning, development, and interest of enabling environments that are available to them. The adults within these environments are not to force the activities but encouraged to challenge themselves and follow the decision of the individual child. "Play is the work of the Child" Maria Montessori (1870-1952) the vision is to combine play with learning to satisfy the child's curiosity whilst still encouraging fun whilst playing. Even though there is listed types of play in the Montessori approach you will not see dress – up games or be told stories that are if the unrealistic fairies and gnomes. You are more likely to hear of the stories of real-life situation in a playful and fun way. In addition, through open-ended play is encouraged and describes as play that is non restricted and of any rules to follow. However, in an environment adopting the Montessori approach you can expect to see a child making snack for the group whilst another would be participating in weeding the community garden (Geneva Montessori 2022). These types of play can lead onto adult led observation records to adapt and progress some environments.

Children are often observed by a numerous health and social care practitioners in their early years. However, how they are observed and assessed differ through different types of observation tools. An observation tool called Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS) provides a snapshot of the child's development level. This observation also includes the current developmental stage of the child and highlight signs to the professional that there is potentially a delay and individual strengths (Welsh Government 2018). SOGS is a play-based assessments the provides a picture of a child's strengths and weaknesses highlighting areas which a child requires further support (Children and Young People's Health Service 2024).

SOGS supports early identification of developmental delay in significant milestones in the early years development stages and undertaken by health visitors

in the United Kingdom. This assessment is part of the Health Child Program (HCP) which is a series of health reviews, screening and immunizations that ensure children get the best possible start in life. The domains of SOGS are observing the child's ability with motor (fine and gross), language – Spoken and hearing, social, academic skills and their passive and active posture (Shropshire Community Health 2021).

Typically, a health visitor will carry out such developmental checks in supporting a SOGS assessment between 24 and 30 months (Williams *et al* 2013). Shropshire Community Health Service NHS (2021) provides information that other professionals other than health visitors can carry out the SOGS assessment. Nursery nurses and speech and language therapists will arrange home or school visits to carry out observations that support the SOGS assessment. The eight key areas they are observing are development skills in are Locomotor, Manipulative, Visuals, Hearing and Language, Speech and Language, Interactive Social Skills, Self-Care Skills and Cognitive ability.

The results of a SOGS assessment are shown in age bands and if the child's developments show to have fallen two age bands than their current age this suggests mild area of delay. Sometimes there can be contributing factors that may affects a child's performance during the assessment (Shropshire Community Health 2021). The problem with SOGS can be that sometimes there is significant amount of change in age ranges that may not be sensitive to developmental change and cannot be accurately compared (Williams *et al* 2013). Following a successful assessment, it can be clear to plan the next steps for targeted intervention and possible referrals to other health and social care professionals. Children under the age of 6 a referral will be placed to a community paediatrician that are specialised in child development. These specialised paediatricians will then support their own assessments and further investigations in providing the right support, advise and awareness of potential diagnosis. Children over the age 6, those of school age will need to be referred to a Neurodevelopmental Pathway (NDP). These referrals will be completed by school, parents and will gather lots of information from SOGS assessment, school observation and parental insight to build a picture before meeting with the child to perform a NDP assessment.

Observations carried out with health or education professionals is a method of being the child to watch, listen, analyse, and document your findings whilst a child explores play and learns. Methods of observation like SOGS allows the practitioners to ensure the child development is as it should be for the child's expected age. The initial advice to support parents and other practitioners would be to adapt their environments to be more stimulating to their developmental need and help the future growth to gain new skills and develop their current knowledge and interests. Observations are to be consistently monitored and reviewed and for the information to be documented effectively to ensure the child is progressing and help identify areas the child is struggling with. It is important to share the observations with parents and other professional to provide a bigger picture of the children's developmental needs (The Global Montessori Network 2020).

Being observant is allowing practitioners to be reflective and be more aware of what they do and why they do it. In Wales, The Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care: Reflective Practise Toolkit supports practitioners to reflect on the quality of care within the early childhood play. The toolkit is set out to help support practitioners to have successful approaches to continuously improve practise to better support children in their care. The framework is set out to support the partnership working across a child's wellbeing, play and learning, environments, care and development and the professional learning support (Welsh Government 2023).

Forman *et al* (no date) believes that whilst observing children you are watching the children play to discover their interests and be able to assess their developmental levels. The opportunity to seek strategies to further encourage their goals and practise their skills. Lastly, observing children allows you to learn more about their personalities. The objective of observing a child is for practitioners to improve their quality of guidance to enhance the child experience in learning. The transferrable skill from observing a child engage in an interest should support proactive decision making to prepare an environment to accommodate a child's interests to improve better conversation, communication, and learning. When a practitioner understands the child's developmental level, they will be able to enter meaningful conversation to prompt development and to be able to practise skills.

Early years curriculum has been designed with play at the forefront recognising that play is key in child development and specific policies have been put in place to ensure that play opportunities are accessible. This is the perspective right across the United Kingdom within health, social care, and educational settings. As also supported in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 31 a child has a right to engage in play and recreational activities that are appropriate to the child's age and be able to participate freely. Children that have opportunity to play can work in partnership with Article 24, that is meeting the needs that impacts their well-being as well as their development. There are studies to support that play deprivation initially demonstrates delay in development. However, after play based interventions it has shown significant progression in some children's development (J.Howard, K.McInnes 2012).

Practitioners and schools work on the vision to develop the curriculum which continuously contributes to the learner's skills. There are four purposes set out in the Curriculum and they are starting points to support the learners to be ambitious, enterprising, ethical, and healthy. A child building ambition will allow them to set themselves high standards and seek and enjoy a challenge whilst being able to problem solve and confidently express their ideas and concept, they are learning about. Applying enterprising in learning will create knowledge and skills to be ready to play a full part in life and work. Promoting Ethnicity will help the child's learning to be good citizens of Wales and the world with knowledge of their culture, communities past and present. Healthy knowledge for a learning can apply the information on healthy diets and take measured decisions about their lifestyle and be responsible for the risks in society (HWB Welsh Government 2022).

An adult's role with supporting children and observing their needs is to be attentive, responsive, respectful, sensitive, a good role model and be at ease in the company of observing the child. A child needs the practitioner to be proactive at stopping, listening, and responding positively to their needs whilst carrying out their observation of a child participating actively in play. The impact of paying attention to the child is building positive relationship is not just a good practise it is central to the child's development and future well-being (Lloyd – Rose 2020). Loizou (2017) explains that the practitioner role during plays differs as the play and engagement unfolds. The purpose of intervention changes from observing, understanding the play idea then stepping into the child's play interests. The next step would be to develop in joint play and building togetherness within play. Sometimes practitioners jump in to intervene to stop or prevent a child hurting themselves. However, having faith in a child's ability to work out their own safety reflections and trouble shoot their way forward in situations can promote the child's problem-solving skills (Brown 2014). This links back to Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) where he promotes risky play and the adult supporting enabling environments to support these experiences (Tovey 2020).

In supporting the adult's role whilst observing children, Montessori (2024) lists out seven approaches to follow to enforce positive behaviours. These are to stay observant, be patient and be aware of any situations that may need adult intervention. Practitioners are to approach the child actively with a calm voice and remain emotionally calm and self-aware. The objective is to ensure the child knows you are there and can share situations and experiences in working together, leading the child led play and not taking over or talking over. Furthermore, Monttessori (2024) explains that practicing the rules and making them established encourages safe play and directed purpose of some place interventions whilst engaging in play. Finally, acknowledging the child's completion of appropriate play, behaviour and achievement will psychotically empower positive relationship between adult and child.

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