

## Children's Play; Theory and Practice

### Section One

#### Sensory Play

Sensory play is a fundamental aspect of early learning and childhood development, it offers a wide range of opportunities for children to explore and learn through hands on, sensory experiences. Sensory play includes activities or provocations that stimulate an individual's senses. These senses are touch, sight, smell, sound, and taste. Through sensory play and experiences children are given the opportunity to explore their environment, develop their thinking skills and experiment with cause and effect. Gascoyne (2016) states sensory play is essential for supporting a child's holistic development, for children under the age of three years old their senses are still developing therefore such play and activities support this development while enhancing their thinking skills.

In early years practice, supporting sensory play requires thoughtful planning, an understanding of the child's development and individual needs, and responsive interaction. Practitioners should ensure sensory experiences are accessible, inclusive and developmentally appropriate. An example of this being, the sensory materials need to be safe for mouthing if the children in their care are babies or toddlers. The environment should be inviting and welcoming, including natural resources for exploration and open-ended child led play. Bruce (2011) states children learn best through exploration and active engagement. Sensory play allows the child to explore and learn about the world around them while enhancing their senses and development. Sensory play should be an essential part of a child's learning and exploration, it should be readily accessible and a part of early childhood education daily, nurturing the child's mind, body and emotional development. Sensory play can include many different materials, these being natural resources like leaves, flowers, sticks for the children to investigate feeling all different textures and smelling different scents while manipulating and using their fine motor skills to explore. Other sensory materials can include fruits and herbs these are appropriate for mouthing children as they are edible and if fruits are chosen sensibly and cut correctly can be explored safely with appropriate supervision while the children enhance their senses and fostering a positive relationship with foods and becoming curious of new tastes.

According to Piaget (1951) sensory play allows children to build the foundation for cognitive skills, learning through direct interaction with their environment. In his view development occurs through a series of stages, sensory play directly supports the sensorimotor stage (birth to approximately 2 years old) where infants and toddlers

learn through reflexes, senses and movement. Sensory experiences allow the children to manipulate, explore and investigate materials while learning about how the world works.

### Outdoor play

Outdoor play should be encouraged from an early age as it supports a positive mindset to physical activities and promotes daily exercise, it is also important for a child's holistic development. Knight (2011) states although outdoor play is vital for young children, some adults do lack the enthusiasm for the outdoors which can lead to them shying away from encouraging the children to explore outdoors. This can be due to lack of knowledge about nature and outdoors, lack of training for physical and risky activities. It is important settings ensure staff are all comfortable with all areas of the setting, often rotating to ensure everyone gains the insights to all activities and areas. Outdoor play can include open-ended play in the garden, park, forests, or any natural environment where children can openly explore and investigate their surroundings engaging in activities such as climbing, running, jumping, digging. Outdoor play can progress in stages, beginning with exploration where the children use their senses and investigation skills to explore and learn about the environment. There's functional play which includes using the items available as they are intended to be used for example kicking and throwing a ball back and forth, functional play involves repeated actions and physical movements. Another stage of outdoor play is constructive play, using items to build dens, transforming items and materials to build or create something new sparking their imagination and creativity. Imaginative play and symbolic play are a crucial part of a child's development, this is where children use their imagination to create stories, scenarios and engage in role play (White, 2008). Physically, outdoor play enhances individuals gross motor skills, balance, coordination and confidence while learning all about their community and the world around them. Tovey (2007) states that outdoor play enhances a child's cognitive development as it stimulates problem solving and critical thinking as children experiment with natural resources, natural resources allow endless play opportunities and enhance children's imagination while they explore and play. Bruner (1966) advocates for discovery play and learning, where children can expand their knowledge through their own explorations. He states that practitioners can extend young children's learning by asking open ended questions and suggesting challenges for them to take part in. This is important for children's communication and language skills as well as their social skills, allowing them to communicate freely with one another. According to Bruce (2011) outdoor play nurtures creativity, allows independent learning, and gives children the sense of well-being which are all essential to the development of confident, capable learners.

## Section Two

Self-directed play is a form of play that is initiated by the child, it is child led and based on their likes and interests, curiosity and play schema rather than directed by adults or being structured for an activity to go a certain way. In early years, self-directed play is important for a child's learning and development, allowing them to explore and investigate their own world in their own way at their pace. Bruce (2011) states self-directed play supports children's holistic development, including their cognitive, emotional, social and physical development by supporting problem solving, thinking skills, imaginative play, and building resilience and independence. Ledendecker (2020) supports this by stating self-directed play offers children endless opportunities, it is important for adults to encourage and support self-directed play through the environment they provide the children with daily. When enabling adults offer open ended experiences and resources for the children this allows them to use their skills and knowledge to explore while building and developing new skills through their explorations. According to Broadhead et al (2010) self-directed play supports personal, social, emotional and communication development when children are given the time, space and access to open ended resources and materials. Hughes (2010) states that environments and settings that offer the children a variety of natural materials and textures, and loose parts encourage curiosity, and independent child led play. Observing children closely without interruption allows practitioners to learn and understand the children's interests and play schemas along with their development pathways to plan for future experiences that will be meaningful and support their learning. White (2012) goes on to explain that play in early years is to support the child's natural drive for exploring and making meaning of their surroundings. When children can choose how and what they play and explore with they are more engaged and focused and more likely to enhance their own learning through their findings.

Practitioners have an important role in their jobs in supporting self-directed play by ensuring they create welcoming environments for the children to explore and extend their own learning. In early years settings this includes providing a rich, warm, safe environment that has plenty of open-ended resources and materials. (Tovey, 2017). Materials such as natural materials, blocks and loose parts allow the children to become curious and use their imagination to play whilst also developing their fine and gross motor skills. Bruce (2011) supports this by stating that enabling environments give children the sense of freedom which allows them to become creative, and problem solve which builds their self-esteem and confidence. Adults also support self-directed play by observing the children and only joining the play when invited, responsive practice helps children feel safe and confident in their own learning while building relationships with trusted adults. By doing this, practitioners help foster independence, resilience, and emotional well-being.

Self-play is important because it allows children to take control of their own learning building their independence for the future. It nurtures children's abilities to think and act independently, make choices and develop lifelong learning habits. In early years settings it allows the children to follow their own interests and likes while making decisions and expanding their learning and development. It also allows the children to learn more about themselves and try new things. This is important for developing a strong sense of self and building their confidence with decision making (Bruce 2011). O'Connor (2020) states this type of play helps children develop their physical skills, such as coordination and control as they confidently use their muscles and body to manipulate and move materials. Outdoor play has endless amounts of benefits for a child, creating a positive mindset boosting endorphins.

### Section Three

Observations in early years can be done in several ways, observations allow practitioners to gain an insight in the child's interests and developmental stages, identifying their strengths and possible play schemas. By observing children in their play practitioners can create personalised learning experiences best suited for their needs and including their interests. It also builds greater relationships with the children while learning about their personalities through meaningful and detailed documentation (Whitebread and Coltman, 2015). The Curriculum for Wales (2022) states observation plays an important role in supporting the children's five developmental pathways these being belonging, communication, exploration, physical development and wellbeing. Observations are especially important in children's early years because their learning is done mostly through actions and play therefore observing and documenting ensures practitioners learn how each child interacts and explores with their environment. Observations help identify where adult support is needed and can even identify any areas of the setting that are being used less frequently allowing for practitioners to think and respond to this by making that area more appealing to the children. Nutbrown (2011) suggests when observations are done effectively, they support exclusive practice and ensure every child's voice is heard. This is in line with the Curriculum for Wales that states observations are not assessments they are a way of learning more about the children while also learning better ways to best support them through their play and explorations.

Time sampling is an observation that is used in early years practice to record a child's actions and activity in timely intervals such as every 5 to 10 minutes over a period. Bruce (2011) states that time sampling is a good observation method for when children need to be observed in groups or to support early intervention. Palaiologou (2016) supports this by stating time sampling is useful for documenting and observing patterns of behaviour, learning the child's favourite areas and interests if they are drawn to one or two areas in the setting, and understanding how the children spend their day and possibly their play schemas.

However, time sampling does have limitations when it comes to certain aspects of the observation, it may lack in detail and miss out important information such as context to the observation or behaviours observed. Therefore, it is important for time sampling to not be the only form of observation as this can result in misinformation and influence the support the child receives. Time sampling does not generally give a holistic view of the child being observed, it focuses on one area of development or learning at a time. It usually records what is happening and how often. (Palaiologou 2016). To gain a holistic view of the child time sampling is best used alongside other observations such as long observations as these include much more detail including any communication or language used, their level of involvement, and what happened and how you could extend next time for a further activity. However, it is important for most observations to be accompanied by other observations to ensure that all information is accurately recorded and collected and all aspects are observed, as all observations are slightly different and record different parts of a child's development or actions.

#### Section Four

Observing young children is one of the most effective ways to gain an accurate understanding of their learning and development. Observing them through their play is a way to get the best insight of the child in the most natural way, through their explorations. Bruce (2011) states observation through play is a valuable tool for assessment, he states children show their deepest thinking and feeling during their play. Whitebread et al (2015) supports this by stating play shows how children approach problems, socialise with others, manage their emotions and others and how they manage the world around them with the knowledge they already have while also learning new skills and information. Play is where children learn and are completely themselves, it's where they explore the environment and develop across all areas of their learning. Through observations practitioners can establish a true reflection of the child and what they are capable of, Nutbrown (2011) states it is important practitioners know that observations are meaningful and involve an understanding into the children's actions, behaviours and how they connect to their schemas and developmental stages. According to Drake (2021) adults support in play is most effective when it is subtle and responsive to the child's specific needs/wants, rather than directing the play and taking over. Adults also support play-based observations by creating enabling environments that include areas rich in open-ended materials that offer open-ended opportunities and freedom for choice and movement.

Observing children in play gives us a more accurate reflection of where they are in their development and learning, this is because play is natural where children feel relaxed and motivated to explore. Therefore, they are more likely to demonstrate a true reflection of themselves and their abilities and interests. Howard and McInnes

(2013) supports this by stating children demonstrate higher levels of involvement, creative skills and problem solving when they are in their own child-led play rather than during a structured activity. As supported by Howard and McInnes play-based observation allows adults to see children as competent, capable and curious individuals. Through sensitive observation and responsive interaction along with thoughtful planning adults can ensure that observations are effective for both children and the practitioners. They are helpful for practitioners to give an understanding and ideas for set ups and provocations for the setting that include the children's different interests and expand their learning through their opinions and voice. The importance of play in observation is further acknowledged in frameworks like the Curriculum for Wales which support observation-led, child-centred approach. Practitioners can help support this by stepping back and allowing the children to take the lead and risk assess situations themselves allowing them to problem solve. Drake (2021) states practitioners can extend play without taking control, they can do this by entering the child's play when invited to do so and asking open-ended questions and extending vocabulary if appropriate. The practitioners knowing the children and having strong bonds and relationships with them and their families will support this as they will already have a great understanding of the child's interests, of their possible play queues and know when they may need to step in if needed. Supporting the children's emotional well-being is also crucial, as when children feel safe and loved they are more likely to engage with play and explore confidently showing their full potential.

Howard and McInnes (2013) states practitioners must prioritise child-led, free play and avoid over structuring the children's learning experiences. Supporting involves creating open flexible spaces with materials that offer open ended play and engage curiosity as self-expression. These can include role play, loose parts, sensory play and natural resources. Observation tools such as running records, photographs, and long observations can help capture moments that reflect a child's holistic development. When adults create conditions where children can play freely and through their own exploration without interruption or the feeling of judgement, they enable richer more accurate observations and note and a deeper understanding of each child and their individual developmental journey allowing them to plan activities and environments more relevant to each child.

Overall, by valuing play as a rich source of learning and taking observations through child-led play allows for observations and documents to be authentic, meaningful and a true reflection of each child's unique development, interest, play schema and needs.

## References

- Broadhead,P., Howard,J., Wood.E. (2010). *Play and Learning in the Early Years*. London: Sage.
- Bruce,T. (2011). *Learning Through Play; For babies,Toddlers and Young Children*. London; Hodder Education.
- Bruner,J. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Drake,J. (2021). *Planning for Children's Play and Learning in Foundation Phase*. London: Routledge.
- Gascoyne,S. (2016). *Sensory Play*. London.
- Howard,J. And McInnes,K. (2013). *The impact of children's perception of an activity as play rather than not play on emotional well-being*.
- Hughes,B. (2010). *Children's Play: A right to Play*. London.
- Ledendecker,M. (2020). *Why Encourage Self-Directed Play?* Available at: <https://www.berkshiremontessori.org/msb-blog/self-directed-play> Accessed on; 26th July 2025.
- Nutbrown,C. (2011) *Threads of Thinking; Schemas and Young Children's Learning*. London: Sage.
- O'Connor,D. (2020). *Understanding Play: Theories and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Palaiologou,I. (2016). *Child Observation for Early Years*. London.
- Piaget,J. (1951). *The psychology of intelligence*. London: Routledge.
- Tovey,H. (2007). *Playing Outdoors; Spaces and Places, Risks and Challenge*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Knight,S. (2011). *Forest School and Outdoor Learning in the Early Years*. London: Sage.
- Welsh Government. (2022). *Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings*. Welsh Government.
- White,J. (2008). *Outdoor Provision in the Early Years*. London: Sage.
- Whitebread,D., Coltman,P. (2015). *Teaching and Learning in the Early Years*. London: Routledge.