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Children's Play: Theory and Practice

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Play is widely recognised as a fundamental aspect of early childhood development. It provides young children with opportunities to explore their environment, express ideas and develop a range of skills. Through play, children build cognitive, social, emotional, and physical abilities while learning in ways that are meaningful and engaging. Parker (2022) suggests that learning through play promotes creativity, problem-solving, and active participation in learning experiences. Different forms of play, including exploratory, creative, and self-directed play support the development of confidence, independence, and holistic growth.

Exploratory play is an important type of play within early childhood education, involving active investigation of materials, environments, and experiences through sensory and physical interaction. Unlike outcome-focused activities, exploratory play emphasises the learning process, allowing children to experiment, evaluate ideas and build understanding through direct experience (Whitebread *et al.*, 2017). This type of play supports intrinsic motivation and helps children develop flexible thinking, resilience, and problem-solving skills (Zosh *et al.*, 2018), as children learn by discovering how objects and environments respond to their actions.

Exploratory play can be supported by providing rich, open-ended environments that stimulate curiosity and investigation (Lynch, 2025). Practitioners should offer versatile materials such as loose parts, natural resources, sand, water, and construction tools that children can manipulate creatively. The adult's role should be supportive but not controlling, as maintaining children's independence is essential (Pyle and Danniels, 2024). Open-ended questioning, such as encouraging children to consider possible outcomes can extend learning without limiting exploration. However, excessive adult direction may reduce opportunities for problem-solving and intrinsic motivation. Weisberg *et al.* (2016) highlight that guided play can improve learning outcomes when scaffolding is used appropriately, allowing children to lead their own learning experiences.

Exploratory play supports children's holistic development by integrating cognitive, physical, social, and emotional learning. Play-based activities contribute to the development of executive functioning skills, including working memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-regulation, which are important foundations for later academic

success (Gibb *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, exploratory play enhances attention control and behavioural regulation, supporting long-term learning outcomes.

Physically, exploratory play promotes both fine and gross motor development as children interact with varied materials and environments (Brown and Vaughan, 2017). Socially and emotionally, it supports independence, confidence, and resilience. Ginsburg (2019) argues that play is essential for emotional development as it allows children to regulate emotions, take manageable risks and learn from real-life experiences. These principles are reflected in early childhood curriculum frameworks such as the Early Years Foundation Stage, which emphasises play in promoting physical well-being, confidence, and social development (Department for Education, 2021)

Creative play is another important aspect of early childhood education as it supports imagination, expression, and engagement with the environment. Activities such as drawing, storytelling, music, movement, and role play enable children to communicate ideas and emotions. Ginsburg (2007) proposes that creative play promotes adaptability, communication skills, and emotional understanding, supporting holistic development across cognitive, physical, social, and emotional domains.

Creative play is best supported through learning environments that provide open-ended resources and opportunities for exploration. Such environments promote curiosity, independent thinking, and creative expression allowing children to construct their own understanding through active engagement. Curriculum perspectives emphasise creativity within expressive arts and design, recognising that imaginative experiences help children develop confidence, individuality, and transferable learning skills (Best Start in Life, 2024). The Cultural Learning Alliance (2023) also highlights that arts-based learning supports communication, emotional development, and idea exploration.

This approach matters because early childhood is a critical period for cognitive, social, and emotional development. Providing open-ended creative opportunities allows children to experiment, solve problems and express emotions in a safe learning environment. When children are encouraged to explore ideas freely, they

are more likely to develop independence, resilience, and positive attitudes towards learning. However, the effectiveness of creative play depends on how practitioners design learning experiences, as overly structured environments may limit children's ability to think creatively and explore possibilities.

Creative play supports executive functioning development, including working memory, cognitive flexibility, and self-regulation, which are essential for academic progress. Ourda (2025) states that creative play enhances problem-solving skills, self-expression, and confidence. However, the effectiveness of creative play depends on how it is implemented in practice.

The sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky explains that children develop knowledge through social interaction, language, and cultural experiences. Vygotsky emphasised that learning is strengthened when children interact with more knowledgeable others. Zhou (2024) supports this perspective, stating that collaborative learning environments promote creativity and thinking skills. The concept of scaffolding is important, as practitioners should guide learning while maintaining opportunities for independence. While adult support is beneficial, excessive intervention may restrict creativity, whereas insufficient guidance may limit learning opportunities.

In conclusion, exploratory and creative play are essential components of early childhood development as they support cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth. Developmental theories, particularly sociocultural theory, highlight the importance of social interaction, language, and guided learning in promoting children's creativity. Practitioners should maintain a balanced approach that supports child-led exploration while providing appropriate scaffolding. Ultimately, play-based learning remains fundamental in supporting children's development, wellbeing, and future educational success.

Self-directed play refers to play that is initiated, controlled, and sustained by the child rather than directed by adults. It allows children to determine what and how they play, including the selection of materials, roles, and meanings within the experience (NAEYC, 2022). Play is widely understood as activity that is “freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated,” emphasising the importance of autonomy in early childhood (Play Wales, 2026). From a developmental perspective, self-directed play positions children as active participants in their learning. Rather than receiving knowledge passively from adults, children construct understanding through exploration, experimentation, and social interaction. This reflects constructivist theories of learning, which suggest that knowledge develops through engagement with the environment and collaboration with others.

Adults play a significant enabling role in supporting self-directed play, although their involvement differs from traditional directive teaching. Instead of controlling the activity, effective adult support involves creating rich learning environments and responding thoughtfully to children’s emerging interests. Skene *et al.* (2022) suggest that high-quality play-based practice includes providing open-ended resources, observing children carefully, and engaging in contingent dialogue that extends thinking while maintaining the flow of play. This approach aligns with guided play, where adults intentionally support learning without determining outcomes in advance. Similarly, Cekaite and Simonsson (2025) argue that adults should follow children’s initiatives, use open-ended questioning and respond sensitively to communicative cues. In this way, adults act as facilitators who design environments and interactions that enable meaningful choice, rather than as instructors who dominate the learning process.

The importance of self-directed play lies in its ability to promote autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and sustained engagement. Self-Determination Theory proposes that individuals are more motivated and experience greater wellbeing when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Within self-directed play, children experience autonomy by making choices, competence by mastering challenges, and relatedness through collaborative interactions. When activities reflect children’s own interests, learning becomes personally meaningful rather than externally imposed. This can result in

deeper engagement and more sustained attention compared to activities directed solely by adults.

Self-directed play also contributes to holistic development. Through role-play and collaborative scenarios, children negotiate rules, manage social interactions, and regulate their emotions (Lyons, 2024). These experiences support cognitive development by encouraging planning, reasoning, and flexible thinking. For example, when children construct imaginary scenarios, they evaluate ideas about cause and effect, experiment with symbolic representation and develop narrative skills. Socially, they learn to cooperate, resolve conflicts, and understand alternative perspectives. Emotionally, they practise managing frustration, excitement, and disappointment within both imagined and real contexts. These competencies develop organically within play, demonstrating that learning is embedded within meaningful experiences rather than separated into isolated academic tasks.

This perspective strongly aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky argued that learning occurs most effectively when children are supported to move beyond their current level of independent functioning through interaction with more knowledgeable others. Contemporary research continues to emphasise the relevance of this framework, with Zaretsky (2024) highlighting the Zone of Proximal Development as central to understanding how guided support extends development. Within self-directed play, adults can offer scaffolding that extends children's current understanding while introducing appropriate levels of cognitive challenge. For example, an adult may ask open-ended questions or introduce new vocabulary to enrich the play scenario, without directing or controlling the activity.

Research by Weisberg *et al.* (2016), suggests that guided play, where adults subtly extend thinking while preserving children's agency, can lead to stronger learning outcomes than either completely unstructured free play or highly directive instruction. This highlights the importance of balance. If adults intervene too heavily, they risk undermining autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Conversely, complete withdrawal may limit opportunities for conceptual extension and deeper learning. Therefore, effective practice requires professional judgement, ongoing reflection, and sensitivity

to individual children's needs. Practitioners must carefully assess when to step in and when to step back, ensuring that support enhances rather than restricts child-led exploration.

Despite its well-documented benefits, implementing self-directed play can present practical challenges. Curriculum expectations, assessment demands, and accountability pressures may limit the time available for open-ended, child-led exploration. In some educational contexts, tensions arise between the need to demonstrate measurable academic attainment and the less immediately measurable developmental benefits of play. However, Parker *et al.* (2022) state that autonomy-supportive environments are strongly linked to long-term educational success, as they promote self-regulation, creativity, and adaptive learning dispositions. Such dispositions are vital for enabling children to respond effectively to increasingly complex learning environments beyond the early years.

Ultimately, self-directed play recognises children as capable and competent learners. It values their ideas, interests, and agency, positioning them as co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients of instruction. By promoting autonomy, motivation and social connection, self-directed play supports not only immediate engagement but also the development of lifelong learning skills. When adults intentionally create supportive environments and adopt facilitative roles, self-directed play becomes a powerful context for holistic growth, enabling children to develop the confidence, independence, and resilience necessary for future learning.

Observation is a fundamental practice in early childhood education used to understand children's learning, behaviour, and development. Aubrey and Ward (2019) define observation as a systematic and purposeful process of watching and listening to children to gather information about their progress, interests, and interactions. Observation is important because it provides evidence of how children learn in natural environments, particularly during play-based experiences. Smidt (2015) emphasises that observation enables practitioners to record behaviour objectively and respond appropriately to children's individual needs.

Observation supports assessment and planning by helping educators identify strengths, developmental stages and learning preferences. It also promotes child-centred practice by enabling adults to extend learning through appropriate support, resources, and interactions. Rather than relying on formal testing, observation recognises that young children often demonstrate learning through exploration, communication, and social interaction.

Observation is especially important in play-based settings, where children engage with open-ended resources such as loose parts. Play-based learning literature suggests that these materials support creativity, imagination, and critical thinking because they allow children to explore, experiment and construct ideas independently (Stronger Practice Hubs, 2022). Providing appropriately challenging loose parts can encourage curiosity, problem-solving, and independent thinking during play.

A developmental journal builds on observation by providing an ongoing record of children's learning and progress over time. It typically includes written observations, photographs, examples of children's work and reflective commentary linked to curriculum frameworks. Developmental journals are widely used within the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) to support formative assessment and individualised planning (Department for Education, 2021). Instead of depending solely on formal tests, journals document learning as it happens during everyday play and activities, reflecting guidance that identifies observation as the main method for understanding young children's development (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

Developmental journals are based on the understanding that young children learn holistically through interaction, exploration, and social experiences. By recording learning over time, practitioners can identify patterns of development, recognise

emerging skills and plan appropriate next steps. Journals also focus not only on what children achieve but on how they approach learning, which is central to effective early years practice (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021).

One key strength of developmental journals is their role in supporting formative assessment. The Education Endowment Foundation (2021) explains that ongoing assessment embedded in daily practice allows practitioners to adapt teaching to meet children's needs. Journals provide evidence of progress over time, helping educators recognise gradual development rather than focusing only on fixed milestones.

Developmental journals also promote reflective practice. By revisiting previous entries, practitioners can evaluate the effectiveness of the learning environment and adult interactions. Birth to 5 Matters (2021) highlights that reflective observation supports understanding of children's interests, dispositions, and schemas, strengthening professional judgement.

Another important benefit is the enhancement of partnerships with parents and carers. The Department for Education (2021) emphasises the importance of collaboration with families to ensure continuity in children's learning. When journals are shared, parents gain insight into their child's experiences and may contribute their own observations from home. This broader perspective strengthens assessment by recognising learning that occurs beyond the setting.

In addition, developmental journals can provide descriptive depth. Unlike checklist-only systems, narrative observations capture context, emotional responses, and social interactions. This supports a fuller understanding of children's motivation and engagement, which are important for long-term learning outcomes (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

However, developmental journals also have limitations. A significant concern is workload. Recording detailed observations and organising documentation can be time-consuming. If too much emphasis is placed on documentation, it may reduce opportunities for meaningful interaction with children. Meloy and Schachner (2019) argue that assessment should inform teaching while avoiding unnecessary administrative burden, suggesting that documentation systems must remain manageable and purposeful.

Another limitation is subjectivity. Observations rely on practitioner judgement, and bias may influence what is recorded. For example, greater emphasis may be placed on observable academic skills rather than social or emotional development, shaping the developmental narrative presented in the journal.

There is also a risk that journals become overly outcome driven. Although the EYFS (Department for Education, 2021) states that assessment should not involve excessive tracking, some settings may prioritise collecting evidence against specific statements rather than capturing authentic learning processes. This approach can narrow observations and reduce attention to creativity, play, and exploration.

Developmental journals have the potential to offer a holistic view of the child by recording learning across multiple areas. The Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study (2025) explains that early learning domains develop together rather than separately, supporting the view that assessment should reflect the interconnected nature of children's development. However, whether a journal provides a truly holistic picture depends on how it is implemented. If entries focus mainly on literacy or numeracy, or are brief and checklist-based, they may not fully represent children's thinking, interests and learning behaviours.

Overall, the strength of developmental journals lies in their flexibility and depth, while their limitations relate to workload, subjectivity and the risk of excessive tracking. When used thoughtfully and in line with current guidance, developmental journals can make a meaningful contribution to child-centred assessment and planning.

Play is important when observing and assessing children because it reflects how young children naturally learn and express understanding. Observing children during play allows practitioners to gather evidence of communication, problem solving, social interaction and emotional development within meaningful and familiar contexts. Play provides opportunities for children to demonstrate knowledge and skills without the pressure of formal assessment. According to Walsh (2020), play-based learning supports authentic assessment because children are more likely to show their true abilities when they are engaged and motivated. Play observation is therefore valuable because it enables children to demonstrate competence independently rather than responding to structured adult-led tasks.

Zosh *et al.* (2017) suggest that observing children during play can provide a more accurate reflection of development because play represents natural learning behaviour. Learning through play promotes curiosity, exploration, and sustained engagement, enabling practitioners to better understand developmental progress. During play, children demonstrate emerging skills in communication, social negotiation and cognitive processing that may not be clear in formal assessment settings. Furthermore, play supports holistic development by integrating cognitive, social, and emotional learning. Wood (2020) explains that play encourages children to experiment with ideas, develop creativity and build confidence through active participation.

Adult understanding of play significantly influences the quality of observation and assessment. McInnes *et al.* (2011) found that practitioners' beliefs about play shape pedagogical practice and affect how children perceive play activities. When practitioners view play as child-led and intrinsically motivated, they are more likely to allow children greater autonomy during exploration. This supports children's confidence, curiosity, and willingness to engage in learning through discovery. In contrast, when play is heavily influenced by curriculum targets, adult direction may increase, which can reduce children's sense of ownership and enjoyment. McInnes *et al.* also suggest that the level of adult control can influence children's engagement, with highly structured adult-led activities sometimes limiting spontaneous play behaviour. Some children may begin to view play activities as work rather than a natural learning experience. Therefore, practitioners should use professional judgement to decide when

to interact and when to allow independent play. This highlights the importance of reflective practice and understanding children's individual learning needs in early years settings.

Effective adult support requires a balance between observation and interaction. Lev Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development emphasises that children learn best when provided with sensitive support that extends their current abilities. Within this framework, children can achieve more complex understanding with appropriate scaffolding than they could independently. McInnes *et al.* (2013) further demonstrate that responsive adult interaction, such as sustained shared thinking, can promote deeper cognitive engagement. However, excessive adult direction may interrupt children's concentration and reduce intrinsic motivation. Therefore, practitioners must judge when to intervene and when to stand back.

Adult knowledge of child development is essential when interpreting play behaviour. Practitioners should understand developmental milestones, individual learning styles and children's emotional confidence. Knowing children's interests, preferences and existing skills helps adults make informed decisions about observation and interaction. Supporting play-based learning also involves creating an enabling environment. The Department for Education (2023) emphasises that learning environments should encourage active exploration, creativity, and critical thinking. This can be achieved by providing open-ended resources, accessible materials and spaces that support independent discovery.

Creating an enabling environment is not a passive process but a professional responsibility. Practitioners must intentionally organise learning spaces to reflect children's developmental needs and promote curiosity. Combining sensitive adult interaction with thoughtful environmental design ensures that play remains meaningful, autonomous and developmentally supportive. Overall, effective observation and assessment through play requires professional knowledge, reflective practice and an understanding of when to support or step back to promote children's learning. Despite the benefits of play-based observation, time constraints in early years settings can limit the depth and frequency of observations, placing pressure on practitioners to balance assessment duties with supporting children's active learning experiences.

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