

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

What is Play?

Bottril (2018, p. 26) says play should be an open-ended opportunity that involves self-chosen challenges. Play offers endless possibilities for every individual child, play is creative, has a risk collaboration and is motivated by the children. Play is a fundamental area of healthy development for both children and the world around them.

UNICEF (2024) agrees that every child has the right to leisure and rest, to participate in play, recreational activities appropriate to their age as well as a wide range of cultural and artistic activities.

Section 1

Role Play

Care for Kids (2023) suggests that role play is how children make sense of their thoughts and the world around them. Role play is acting out experiences, ideas, or stories. Children can take on different roles or play different characters that can be fictional, nonfictional, or an object. Role play involves acting out certain roles as children use their imagination and creativity to bring their character to life. Role play has a variety of stages that children can oversee, for example solitary play (independent), on-looker (watching others play) and parallel play (playing with/ next to another child) can be demonstrated, this helps the children choose their own way of playing and with who, this can often be a comfort, support and encourage the children with independence as they decide for themselves how they play within that time and environment.

Early Start (2023a) says, role play supports a child at any age with their holistic development. This can be particularly supported within an early year setting by having an open environment with a designated area for this play to take place. Within the setting, children can communicate, and experience play with other children with a wide range of resources, toys, and costumes to support their learning. As this play occurs children can develop and refine their fine and gross motor skills, communication skills, imaginative skills as well as the 6 key areas of learning of Curriculum for Wales, these being Expressive Arts, Health and Well-being, Humanities, Languages, Literacy and Communication, Mathematics and

Katie Cornelius-Davies

2315284

ECEY4003 – Children's Play: Theory and Practice

3000 words

Numeracy, Science and Technology. Children can collaborate with others, learn about different cultures and express their ideas and feelings through play in a controlled environment.

Little Lincoln (2023) mentions, role play invites children to emphasise with others as they develop their new relationships within the setting, role play can be a way for children to learn about emphasising and understanding different emotions and feelings that they may feel, taking on the role of a character can help children learn empathy and see different perspectives from all points of view while learning to regulate their own emotions.

Early Start (2023b) also agrees that role play is inclusive to any child, at any age. Toddlers learning through role play helps their communication, social skills, and turn-taking by experimenting at an early age within a safe and open environment. Children can interact with others while role playing, children can often find it easier to initiate conversations with children and adults while being in their role, however it is important practitioners take a step back to observe unless the children initiate or shows a play cue for adults to join, for example verbal, eye contact or body language.

Creative Play

KidCoachApp (2023) Creative play allows children to inspect within designing, exploring, and investigating new ideas as well as using their imagination to produce, make or create a product. This product can be real, or imaginative. Within this play, children can use a range of resources, tools, props, and equipment. Creative play has a widespread of benefits within an early year setting as practitioners and the safe, inviting environment encourages creativity within many areas of the selected room such as painting areas, reading areas, arts and crafts, construction and having instruments to explore. Creative play invites children to develop concentration, boost imagination, develops cognitive thinking as well as expands vocabulary and stimulating senses.

Again, creative play includes all stages of play including solitary, on-looker and parallel depending on what the child chooses and the age of the child, for example, babies normally play solitary with a shaker instrument to embrace sounds whereas nursery children (3 years old) could choose any of these ways themselves.

Katie Cornelius-Davies
2315284
ECEY4003 – Children's Play: Theory and Practice
3000 words

Rhino Play (2024) also says that creative play supports children of all ages through holistic development. While playing through creativity, children can embrace all aspects of developmental areas both physically and mentally. For example, hand-eye coordination, sensory development, exploring and developing upon imagination, concentration and attention as well as understanding different environments and confidence within a social setting and self-confidence.

Within an early year setting there are practitioners that are on hand to support children within their learning and play. As play should be a daily occurrence and routine, it is important that staff and practitioners within the environment also plans for quality creative experiences too. These well-planned creative experiences will encourage children within their holistic development to progress further as they adopt an open-ended approach that facilities interest for each child. As this play is taking place, it is important that adults are there to encourage risk-taking knowing that they will be supported if necessary. Practitioners can demonstrate by playing alongside the child(ren) when they are unsure but should also be able to take a step back to observe until necessary to interfere. (SAGE Publications Inc, 2022, p.14)

Section 2

Hosteller Scharer, J. (2017) begins by saying Vygotsky's theory defines play as an important part of early childhood. Play promotes cognitive, social, and emotional development in children. Vygotsky's play includes an object-based exploration, constructional play, and games with rules. Children should create an imaginary situation, take on and act out roles as well as following rules throughout. Vygotsky believed that role playing, and imaginary situations are planned with rules given by practitioners. Play is for all ages including toddlers and babies as they learn to explore physical objects to develop imagination and interactions between object and different play roles as they grow.

However, Play Wales (2024) believes play is controlled and structured by children within the area wherever and whenever the opportunities arise. Play is filled with uncertainty, challenge, flexibility, and fun. Play should be self-motivated with no end goal or reward and has a fundamental part of healthy development. Children should have the time, space, and permission to have this time to play freely, inside, and outside.

Play Adventures (2019) starts by saying self-directed play is a concept of allowing children to play without a framework, on their own and without an adult's influence. Self-directed play is defined as freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. As a result of this, children can take control by determining the play, rules, and characters. Children can perform their instincts, ideas and interests as well as playing on their own or with others in their own way.

The Montessori School (2020) say self-directed play can have a positive impact on children by building upon self-confidence, encouraging independence, stimulating imagination, developing problem solving and encouraging children to learn at their own pace within their internal motivation.

As mentioned above, self-directed play is child-chosen, on their terms, creating roles and rules within their own play while playing independently or with friends within the setting.

Katie Cornelius-Davies

2315284

ECEY4003 – Children's Play: Theory and Practice

3000 words

However, Toy Ideas (no date) mentions as a practitioner within an early year setting it is important to ensure children are comfortable with self-directed play but is vital that the practitioner does not initiate any play or tell the children the roles or rules that should be shown. Self-directed play allows the child to meet their individual needs as practitioners provide a safe, open, and intriguing environment for the children within their setting. They continue by expressing how adults can support self-directed play without taking the fun element away, such as setting up a variety of play areas with several different toys or materials that they think would interest the children due to having strong relationships and knowing the children's like and dislikes for the children to explore for themselves.

However, rules should not be given on how to play with the items. Some objects that could be available for children within an early year's setting is loose parts. Loose parts have a variety of ways that can be at interest to a child as they can explore, combine, or take apart to use in a different way. It is also important for practitioners to give the children their "free time" or "Golden Time" where children decide for themselves to explore their interests around them, indoors and outdoors.

According to Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) being within and showing an effective setting shows a combination of adult-led and child-led activities. Practitioners should be interacting with children to enable them to create activities themselves. Bennett, Wood, and Rogers (1997; McInnes et al. 2011; Pascal 1990) continues by saying it is often seen that practitioners within an early year setting are not comfortable with play and child-led activities as play is held in low esteemed, compared to activities which is presented as tasks. They continue by saying practitioners are normally giving instructions to a child's play and have less child-led activities within early year settings due to the concern and management of behaviour within these sessions. This should not be the case within an early setting, children should be able to lead within play and activities going on around them to promote independency as they progress within their likes and dislikes as they develop with the world around them.

Section 3

According to (Welsh Government, 2024a, p. 37) Observations within an early year setting play a vital role within the practice. When observing children, practitioners should have good knowledge and understanding of children and child development as a whole. It is important that the child is at the centre of this process and the process is completed without any distress or worry towards the individual. Observations give the practitioners and adults within the setting the knowledge of motivation, engages and interests of each individual child. Effective observation enables practitioners to analyse what they see and hear; professionals are then able to respond in ways that will help children progress. It is important practitioners do this often to ensure any work can be put into place and in planning for future events, such as challenging children to build a tower of 10 blocks instead of 6 or building friendships within the area by putting toys that the children have shown interest in within an area to promote communication. Observations can be specifically planned for that session as well as daily by overseeing play and tasks as the professional takes a step back to observe the child confidently to see any progress or development, this can become a very positive outcome as the child will not feel under-pressure or watched while playing as they would normally. Professionals should discretely do this for children to continue what they are doing, otherwise children may act differently when they know observations are operating.

Both (Welsh Government, 2024b, p. 37) and Welsh Assembly Government (2024) say that while observing a child it is important that the practitioner does the same cycle each time, for example, having knowledge of child development, the child should be at the centre of the process as adults begin to notice interests, fascinations, levels of involvement and emotions, leading onto analysing and interpreting what they see and hear and then to respond by putting steps into place within planning. Observations should be undertaken across all 7 areas of learning, these include personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity, language, literacy and communication skills, mathematical development, knowledge and understanding of the world around them as well as physical and creative development. Observations should also be undertaken when children are playing alone, interactions with other children and practitioners whether it is verbal or body language.

There are many strategies practitioners can observe and assess children, a couple of these being The Schedule of Growing Skills assessment and a Time Interval Tracker, both are extremely effective within an early year setting.

NHS Shropshire Community Health (2022) says, The Schedule of Growing Skills assessment can be used at any time with children birth to 5 years old. During this observation professionals can assess 8 key developmental areas, these being locomotor, manipulative, visual development, hearing and language, speech and language, interactive social skills, self-care, and cognitive development. The assessment scores the individual child as an age in months, this enables practitioners, specialists, and parents/carers to see the age the child is developing at. This information is then processed and used to develop any areas needed within given activities or play.

Portland Public Schools (2024) mentions observing children with time interval tracking sheet is aimed at observing behaviour, however many settings use this observation for activity, and interactions during a specified time. Within an early year setting, practitioners should identify how long the session should go and the time intervals that should be noted down, these time intervals should be all equal in length, such as every 10 minutes for 2 minutes, practitioners will write down the activity of the child at that specific minute. The observer will then calculate the percentages of intervals which the behaviour changed or occurred, these percentages can be calculated on each precise moment, entire interval or at any time during the interval.

University of Kansas (no date) During this observation there are many benefits for both children and practitioners, this helps and shows a good understanding of the child as they put elements in place to help the child progress in a positive way. For example, showing the process of behaviours with no clear beginning or end, distinguishing children's communication skills with peers, noticing likes and dislikes of the child, and knowing that observations can be brief but can be extended if needs be. However, these observations can also have disadvantage limitations as this observation is only noted within certain time intervals which means milestones could be missed in between, requires a practitioners undivided attention, and requires tight time keeping within a busy environment.

Observations should be based around a holistic approach as practitioners consider all aspects of a child's development as they recognise that elements of development are interconnected and equally important for a child's overall wellbeing. There are many strengths when observing children around their holistic development, for example, you can see the child's abilities and interests within different areas of development, enables practitioners to provide targeted support in a child's overall progress, and ensuring no aspect of a child's development is overlooked. However, the limitations could be that you miss a vital milestone when trying to incorporate all developmental areas. (Webster, C., 2023)

Main, P. (2021) and Learning Journals (2024) both agree, the Leuven scale is a 5-point scale that allows professionals to measure a child's emotional well-being and involvement, which they believe are 2 vital components of learning, progress, and development in children due to safeguarding a child's development whilst encouraging learning too. Measuring whether a child is confident in their surroundings means the child is more likely to learn and develop in a healthy way. Practitioners promoting an environment where children can feel happy, safe and supported is vital to this.

There are 5 points within this scale for emotional wellbeing, 1 being extremely low and 5 being extremely high. These can be very effective as the practitioners are in full involvement to ensure children are happy and safe within their environment, practitioners are then able to put procedures into place to help the children within their well-being situation, such as interventions, areas to reflect, having a "safe" person to express and presenting their likes within the environment for comfort and support.

Section 4

There are a variety of reasons why practitioners should observe children during play. As said previously, play brings out the strengths and the limitations out of children. Children play with materials, objects, and their imagination that they admire. When observing and assessing children during play practitioners are more likely to get an accurate reflection of where they are in their development by the activities being led entirely by the child, this means children can explore, communicate, challenge, and expand the activity that they are doing at this time. As a result of this practitioners can get a good understanding of what the child can really do. However, it is often seen that if a child knows they are being watched or observed, children can often take a step back or stop their play completely, this means practitioners should be discreet when the observation is taking place. EarlyYearsCareers (2016) agrees, observing children's play may be influenced by certain factors such as, other children providing input. However, assessing play means you can see ways children respond to activities, see if a child is progressing, different interactions between children and adults, observing the child's language development as well as seeing any patterns in behaviour and friendships.

Observing children in play give practitioners a more accurate reflection of where they are in development as children are doing what they enjoy, this means children are at their most comfortable and content with what they are doing and how their doing it. While playing, children express their development, interests, and strengths without realising it. As a result of this, adults can accurately observe and assess their experiences and development. Both West Sussex County Council (2021) and Gowrie (2023) agree by saying observing a child during play enables the staff to identify each child's likes and dislikes, during this process adults are also able to see the child's responses to different scenarios due to the child being unaware they are being watched and observed. Children feel more comfortable to show their true selves and express during development. During assessments while playing practitioners can also identify negative issues that may arise, for example what situations make the child feel anxious or worried. These observations provide adults with reliable information about children as individuals as well as supporting awareness of children's skills, development, and strengths as well as limitations.

Katie Cornelius-Davies

2315284

ECEY4003 – Children's Play: Theory and Practice

3000 words

When observing play there are many ways professionals can support the process, for example, adults should stand back and not interfere within the observation of play, professionals should have a good knowledge and understanding of child development as well as knowing the individual child well, their interests and likes, the child's confidence as well as their own skills of observation. Practitioners should also know how to set up an enabling environment before the observation begins to ensure the child can reach their full potential within their assessment.

According to Howard, J., McInnes, K. (2012) when observing children, they often demonstrate an increased emotional wellbeing when they recognise an activity as play rather than not play. Children tend to use cues such as the location of play, adult presence, and choice before they can determine whether the activity is based around play. For example, play is viewed as adult presence being near-by but not involved, location of choice by the child and choice in participation. Whereas activity based is looked on as adult being involved, location being sat at a table/ sat on carpet and having no choice in participation. However, in observations when playing it has been noticed that play perceived activities has children smiling and expressing positive feelings more during sessions as children are attentive and focused on the play. Children find it more comfortable when they feel free in making independent choices, however in activities not perceived as play, children are assessed as showing negative behaviour, not engaging, and easily distracted. In conclusion, it is distinguished that observing children when they see activities as child-led play, children are more relaxed, showing their full potential and comfortable within the setting environment.

Katie Cornelius-Davies
2315284
ECEY4003 – Children's Play: Theory and Practice
3000 words

References:

Bennett, Wood, and Rogers (1997; McInnes et al. 2011; Pascal 1990) 'European Early Childhood Education Research Journal', *The Role of Adults in the Early Years Classroom*, p. 271. (accessed: 2 March 2024)

Bottril, G. (2018) *Can I go and Play now? Rethinking the Early Years*. London: Sage
(Accessed: 26 February 2024).

Care for Kids (2023) *The Importance for Role Play in Early Years*. Available at: [the-importance-of-role-play-in-the-early-years](#) (Accessed: 24 February 2024).

Ellis, T. (2024) *Theory Focus: The Benefits of Imaginative Play*. Available at: [the-benefits-of-imaginative-play](#) (Accessed: 23 February 2024).

Early Start (2023a) *Importance of Role Playing*. Available at: <https://www.earlystartgroup.com/nursery/importance-of-role-playing/#:~:text=Develop%20their%20social%20skills%2C%20as,feelings%20in%20a%20relaxed%20environment> (Accessed: 24 February 2024).

Early Start (2023b) *Importance of Role Playing*. Available at: <https://www.earlystartgroup.com/nursery/importance-of-role-playing/#:~:text=Develop%20their%20social%20skills%2C%20as,feelings%20in%20a%20relaxed%20environment> (Accessed: 24 February 2024).

EarlyYearsCareers (2016) *Observing Children's Play*. Available at: <https://www.earlyyearscareers.com/eyc/latest-news/observing-childrens-play/> (Accessed: 2 March 2024).

Gowrie (2023) *Meaningful Observations in Early Childhood Education and Care*. Available at: <https://www.gowriensw.com.au/thought-leadership/observation-in->

Katie Cornelius-Davies

2315284

ECEY4003 – Children's Play: Theory and Practice

3000 words

[childcare#:~:text=Observation%20is%20a%20fundamental%20tool,and%20educators%2C%20parents%20and%20children.](#) (Accessed: 2 March 2024).

Howard, J., McInnes, K. (2012) 'The Impact of Children's Perception of an Activity as Play rather than Not Play on Emotional Well-Being', *Child: care, health and development*, Swansea University, Swansea, UK, and School of Psychology, University of Glamorgan, Pontypridd, UK, p. 737, p. 738 and p. 740. (Accessed: 29 February 2024).

Hosteller Scharer, J. (2017) 'Supporting Young Children's Learning in a Dramatic Play Environment', *Journal Childhood Studies*, Article from Research, p. 63, p. 64. (Accessed: 29 February 2024).

Little Lincoln (2023) *How Children are Developing Empathy through Play*. Available at: <https://littlelincoln.co.uk/blog/developing-empathy-through-play/#:~:text=Another%20benefit%20of%20role%2Dplay,of%20others%27%20emotions%20and%20perspectives.> (Accessed: 24 February 2024).

Learning Journals (2024) *What is the Leuven Scale and How to Use it*. Available at: <https://learningjournals.co.uk/what-is-the-leuven-scale-and-how-to-use-it/> (Accessed: 2 March 2024).

Main, P (2021). *Leuven Scale: A teacher's guide*. Available at: <https://www.structural-learning.com/post/leuven-scale-a-teachers-guide> (accessed: 29 February 2024).

Welsh Government (2024a) 'A Curriculum For Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings', *Observations*, p. 37. (Accessed: 1 March 2024)

NHS Shropshire Community Health (2022) *Interval Recording/ Time Sampling*. Available at: [Interval Recording/Time Sampling Portland Public Schoolshttps://www.pps.net › lib › Centricity › Domain](https://www.pps.net › lib › Centricity › Domain) (Accessed: 1 March 2024).

Katie Cornelius-Davies

2315284

ECEY4003 – Children's Play: Theory and Practice

3000 words

Play Adventures (2019) *Self-Directed Play*. Available

at: [https://www.playadventures.org/self-directed-](https://www.playadventures.org/self-directed-play#:~:text=Self%20Directed%20Play%20is%20the,intent%20of%20their%20play%E2%80%8B)

[play#:~:text=Self%20Directed%20Play%20is%20the,intent%20of%20their%20play%E2%80%8B](https://www.playadventures.org/self-directed-play#:~:text=Self%20Directed%20Play%20is%20the,intent%20of%20their%20play%E2%80%8B) (Accessed: 26 February 2024).

Play Wales (2024) *All About Play Work*. Available at: <https://play.wales/playwork/> (Accessed: 28 February 2024).

Portland Public Schools (2024) *Interval Recording/ Time Sampling*. Available

at: https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/178/interval_recording.docx (Accessed: 1 March 2024).

Rhino Play (2024) *The Benefits of Creative Play*. Available

at: <https://rhinoplay.co.uk/news/the-benefits-of-creative-play/> (Accessed: 25 February 2024).

Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002) 'European Early Childhood Education Research Journal', *The Role of Adults in the Early Years Classroom*, p. 271. (Accessed: 2 March 2024)

SAGE Publications Inc. (2022) 'Chapter 1', *An Approach to Creative Learning in the Early Years*, p.14. (Accessed 29 February 2024).

Toy ideas (no date) *What is Self-Directed Play and How Your Child Can Benefit*. Available

at: [https://www.toy-ideas.com/play/2021/10/11/what-is-self-directed-play-and-why-its-](https://www.toy-ideas.com/play/2021/10/11/what-is-self-directed-play-and-why-its-important)
[important](https://www.toy-ideas.com/play/2021/10/11/what-is-self-directed-play-and-why-its-important) (Accessed: 28 February 2024).

The Montessori School (2020) *Why Encourage Self-Directed Play?* Available

at: <https://www.berkshiremontessori.org/msb-blog/self-directed-play> (Accessed: 27 February 2024).

UNICEF (2024) *A Summary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Available

at: [https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNCRC_summary-](https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNCRC_summary-1_1.pdf)
[1_1.pdf](https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNCRC_summary-1_1.pdf) (Accessed: 26 February 2024).

Katie Cornelius-Davies
2315284
ECEY4003 – Children's Play: Theory and Practice
3000 words

University of Kansas (no date) *Interval Recording/Time Sampling*. Available at: http://www.specialconnections.ku.edu/?q=assessment/data_based_decision_making/teacher_tools/partial_interval_recording (Accessed: 2 March 2024).

Welsh Government (2024b) 'A Curriculum For Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings', *Observations*, p. 37. (Accessed: 1 March 2024)

Welsh Assembly Government (2024) *Observing Children*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/74f7c7cc-d337-4fd0-9604-27b3d1a5746d/observing-children.pdf> (Accessed: 1 March 2024).

West Sussex County Council (2021) *Effective Practice: Observation, Assessment and Planning*. Available at: https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/media/5555/effective_poa_and_planning.pdf (Accessed: 2 March 2024).

Webster, C. (2023) 'A Positive Approach to Observations', *Connect Childcare*, 18 October 2023. Available at: <https://connectchildcare.com/blog/a-positive-approach-to-observations/#:~:text=Holistic%20Approach%20to%20Observations,for%20a%20child%27s%20overall%20wellbeing>. (Accessed: 2 March 2024).

Youll, V. (2023) *What is Creative Play?* Available at: <https://www.kidcoach.app/article/what-is-creative-play> (Accessed: 25 February 2024).