

ECEY4003

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

Word Count: 3091

A Portfolio

Part 1: Evidence of a clear understanding of the importance of a variety of play types. The significance of holistic play should also be considered.

Part 2: Evidence of a clear understanding of why it is important for children to choose their own play and the importance of the role of the adult in children's play.

Part 3: In depth discussion and understanding of an observation method for young children.

Part 4: Demonstrate an understanding of the role of play when undertaking observations and assessments of children and consider how this affects the child's engagement and the accuracy of the observation.

I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

Part 1: Evidence of a clear understanding of the importance of a variety of play types. The significance of holistic play should also be considered. (818 Words)

Play takes on a variety of forms, all with individualised benefits to promote development in children. Article 31 of the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child states “Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities.” (UNICEF - Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2013).

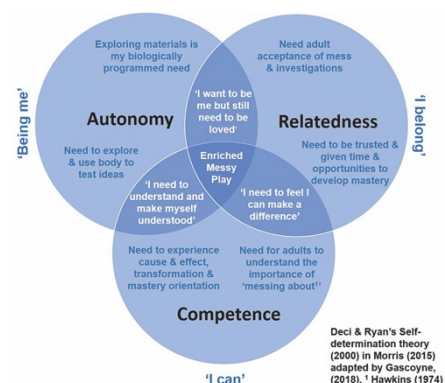
### Messy Play

Messy play is one type of play that is massively vast, sometimes referred to as ‘Sensory play’ messy play explores a child's senses, allowing them to interact with materials in their own way. (NHS, N.D)

There is the clear fine motor skill development that will be involved, and there's a large potential for gross motor skills; especially in babies/toddlers as they may practice walking on a variety of surfaces such as mud, sand, or water. Messy play also holds value in cognitive development, allowing children to build their understanding of the world, establishing cause and effect, there are also significant opportunities to develop language skills, utilising words that may not be used in every day life such as “squishy” or “pointy”. Messy play can also be a group activity, this can further develop skills by the introduction of socialisation. Language can develop, turn taking, sharing, manners can develop as well as discovering social boundaries.

Source A taken from “Messy Play in the Early Years” by Susan Gascoyne 2019, shows how high quality messy play supports competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Gascoyne explores each section deeper, and explores each component's relationship with one another; highlighting how many individual things can be learnt from man-made or natural set-ups, the

sensory experience and the joy that comes with the freedom to create the mess and explore freely. Tying in with Gascoyne's analysis, messy play provides autonomy, relatedness and competence – which, one could argue is an ideal recipe for a



confident and capable child who is able to support their own development more efficiently than a child who has not had these opportunities.

### Outdoor Play

Outdoor play is also a method of play that adopts a holistic approach. It is a very broad concept of play and covers specific disciplines such as forest. Forest school is defined by six core principles – one of which being a “Holistic Learning Principle” (Forest School Association, N.D). Forest school is an approach adopted in many settings, often given a designated afternoon to explore the forest areas surrounding or nearby to the school. Some schools are also fortunate enough to live close to the beach and have the opportunity to further develop on forest schools and provide “coastal school provision”. A school in North Wales (Rydal Penrhos Pre-School) specifies their utilisation of forest and coastal school provision in their pre-school due to the proximity to the beach and woodland areas.

Outdoor play envelops any play that takes place outdoors. It is promoted, especially in forest school, to have outdoor learning take place over at least two seasons; allowing children to experience change, and growth, supporting understanding time passing in a visual sense. It also promotes sensory experiences, feeling the warm sun, hearing wildlife, watching bees interact with flowers is stimulating in the same way that feeling the rain, slipping on mud and hearing streams and rain hit leaves. The book “playing and learning outdoors” by Jan White (2020) focuses on how outdoor learning is holistic. White discusses the personal and social development that can be developed in the outdoors – children have an opportunity to work in groups and pairs especially when encountering something new or attempting to build something. They can employ teamwork skills, in turn improving language and collaboration, discussion can also erupt from experiences founded in outdoor play, insects and plants can spark interest allowing for group or one to one learning with an educator. As well as linguistic improvements children can physically develop; uneven terrain mixed with the need to duck, climb and often catch themselves when they trip all develops the child's hand-eye coordination and spatial awareness; this is supported in Bilton's (2026) book Physical Development and Outdoor Learning: A Practical Guide for the Early Years where she reviews the sensory and motor experiences happening and going hand in hand to support navigation of outdoor terrain. Children are also able to teach themselves their own limits, by supporting

children climbing or sliding they can learn their comfortability, creating their own boundaries and exploring in a safe and monitored way; adults play a crucial role in supporting a child in outdoor play, providing them with guidance for what is and isn't safe and modelling behaviour. Outdoor play can also incorporate creativity, many children will have made pictures with leaves, sticks and rocks; supporting creativity, and self expression. Maths and science is also very easily incorporated into outdoor play; counting activities, estimating weight (heavy or light), more or less, and looking at plant growth and animals found in areas can be more captivating than expected.

Part 2: Evidence of a clear understanding of why it is important for children to choose their own play and the importance of the role of the adult in children's play. (786 Words)

If toddlers can feel comfortable and confident playing on their own, they will also feel capable of other tasks on their own. Meagan Ledendecker (2020) of the Montessori School of the Burkhshires places emphasis on the importance of more imaginative 'toys' like cardboard tubes, balls, playdough and fabrics. The idea of these items is that children will need to use their imagination, these items are diverse and can play a role in a variety of types of play unlike toys such as dolls which are never anything but a doll. One key point made in this article regarding the importance of self-directed play is the lack of educational goals; children develop their play with their own goals and motives in mind, making self-directed play an intrinsically motivated concept. Stroud (1995) also takes the idea of imaginative toys being beneficial for independent and self-directed play, creating a comparison between blocks and their symbolism for alternative objects with letters and their symbolism of ideas.

The Montessori theory of education encapsulates independence and intrinsic motivation, ensuring the environment is accessible, for play and also day-to-day activities, ensuring children have correct sized furniture and utensils promotes the independence to move them around where needed; this concept is explored deeper by Maria Montessori in 'The Montessori Method' whereby autonomy is decidedly paramount to promote learning through play.

Friedrich Froebel also places heavy emphasis on autonomy in the early years.

"Education... should in the first instance be passive and watchfully following and not

dictatorial and interfering.” The usage of the word “dictatorial” highlights how play can feel to a child when adults take the lead, restricting creativity and forcefully controlling ideas; Froebels high value on autonomy reinforces the idea that he believes children should have control over their own play/learning in the early years.

Following an observation of Vygotskys work, Lindqvist (2001) created her own work exploring the role of the adult in play, creating the idea that adults are always involved in play whether it be direct or indirect. Lindqvist proposes a very positive outlook on adult ‘interference’ in play, mostly with links to scaffolding play and supporting a more “learning focused” idea of play. This idea of complete positive adult intervention is opposed by Sands (2013) who discussed “adulteration” and its effects on play, specifically looking at “play annihilation” and how the input of adults can cause play annihilation by having a lack of understanding of the dynamics of play. However, Sands (2013) does highlight situations where adult intervention is necessary and helpful to the development of play, in situations where conflict resolution is required and when an adult is invited into play; Sands also looks at the adult as a resource, helping in situations where children may be unable to achieve goals independently – this may be due to a lack of equipment, or physical capabilities. Pyle (2016) also shows positives and negatives of teacher/adult intervention when children are actively engaged in play, highlighting how teachers are at risk of ‘hijacking’ play but also have a place in play-based pedagogy.

Children tend to be driven by intrinsic motivation, and they utilise play to satisfy those desires; Vygotsky (1978) supports the idea of intrinsic motivation in play as he discusses a child’s innate desire to satisfy their desires immediately, this concept of a personal drive that feels the need for satisfaction is also supported by Freud (1925) and his idea of the “Id” controlling desires, especially in early childhood. When adults take control of play, by giving rigid structure and restrictive rules children, likely, won’t be able to satisfy their desires, this is likely to lead to disinterest as they are unable to achieve their personal goals/satisfaction in the play. Macdonald (2022) explores the concept of play not being play when the adult has full control, supporting the idea of a disinterest in ‘play’ as it is not truly ‘play’ to the children involved. Macdonald also uses the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the

Child (UNCRC), showing their idea of play is something that is child-led; providing a legal right for children to be able to choose their own play.

There are many core pedagogies which support child-led play as a core foundation of their education; one key example is the schooling in Reggio Emilia. When adopting the Reggio Emilia approach, timings are less strict, creativity is paramount and play is key. Santín and Torruella (2017) the positives of the Reggio Emilia approach and its freedom and creativity which enhances learning. In having such a strong stance on creativity, it allows children to satisfy their intrinsic motivation, by transporting their play around the class and creating, not only art but ideas, not restricted by an adult's idea of play.

### Part 3: In depth discussion and understanding of an observation method for young children. (756 Words)

There are a variety of observation methods that can be employed when working with children. Observations, like assessments can be formative or summative, the two types will have different outcomes, eg, formative will be more natural, day to day observations whereas summative observations will typically have a set goal that is being reviewed or “tested”. West Sussex County Council (2021) highlights the commonplace of observations and how they are engrained in daily life for yearly years practitioners and defining observations as “Observation describes the process of watching the children in our care, listening to them and taking note of what we see and hear.”

Estyn (2024) also highlights the importance of effective observations and the incorporation with efficient communication between staff – Estyn's example of a nursery using 'Notice', 'Analyse', and 'Respond' where staff are acutely aware of each child's needs and observations are discussed between staff to support staff development in furthering learning, staff then also tailor activities to a child's needs if they require support in specific areas.

The Welsh Government (2025), alongside, Estyn, discuss the observation method Notice, Analyse and Respond. Each component has a detailed methodology to support high quality execution. The notice component covers all elements of the initial observation – not only asking “what can I see” but examining social, emotional

and behavioural patterns, reactions to situations, distraction levels, interruptions, as well as reviewing what the child can physically complete. Findings are then analysed, analysis can be completed quickly in the moment, or for a more in depth analysis, findings can be discussed as a team to share ideas; a group analysis supports a discussion for the “respond” section. Responding to findings and tailoring environment to support growth and development allows for children to receive an individualised experience for learning, expanding specific areas that need improvement.

This observation method is very broad, it has significant positives, such as its spontaneity; practitioners can complete this type of observation whenever, and anything that is noticed is a valid observation. This observation type also promotes communication between staff, findings are less likely to just be noted down and forgotten as they are analysed and larger responses can happen like changing provision. Another positive for this method is that it does not have to be a group effort, “notice, analyse, respond” can happen in a few seconds and can be as small as changing terminology used for the child or taking a few steps back. Although this observation method has an array of positives, there are a few things about this method that can limit its usage; as this observation method has such a broad scope many components can be overlooked. Many practitioners likely cannot remember everything a child is supposed to be able to achieve at every age, meaning that it may be difficult to spot subtle developmental delays when there is no set “goal” to test against the national average. This could be combatted by completing the same observation type, but holding set objectives to look for such as a “Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS)” allows for a more streamlined observation.

Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS) are used most commonly by healthcare professionals to ensure children are developing at a consistent rate that is in line with the expectancy for their age range. SOGS are used to diagnose developmental disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in children. They can also be used by childcare professionals to complete assessments to provide a baseline of children’s performance and compare to the national average; this will then be analysed and the response would be interventions, additional tasks or contacting external professionals where needed. SOGS are significantly important when testing

for physical or mental delays, allowing support to be put in place as soon as possible. However, SOGS observations rely on observers to hold a good understanding of what they are looking for and what the “average” is; observers completing this style of observation must be careful to assess what is happening, but also what is not happening that should be at the child’s age. SOGS observations also hold the risk of missing crucial information as it is not what’s being looked for. For example, if a child shows significant verbal development but fine motor skills are being assessed, the important verbal advancement is likely to be overlooked as it is not the centre of attention for the observation. This means, especially in an early years setting, the ability to analyse and respond to a multitude of noticed factors is reduced as a limited amount of “noticed”.

Part 4: Demonstrate an understanding of the role of play when undertaking observations and assessments of children and consider how this affects the child's engagement and the accuracy of the observation. (731 Words)

When considering observations of internal staff, it is important to note the potential for an unconscious bias to effect the outcome; the undertones of unconscious biases in childcare are noted in an article published by Louis and Betteridge (2020), article reviews how subtle relationship dynamics (such as being neighbours) can have an influence on a practitioners reaction to a child’s behaviour. Another effect that can come into play when observations are completed is the halo effect, Atkins (2025) outlines the halo effect with the idea that an initial impression made/ a pre-conceived idea of someone can affect the rest of the interactions and sway them in a positive or negative direction. Both an unconscious bias and the halo effect can infiltrate observations in unnoticed ways, so in situations of observing play it may be beneficial to have another observer (although not always possible with staffing) or ensuring factual notations of what is occurring and assessing the deeper meaning as a team to gain multiple viewpoints.

Play observations are also used with external professionals, Shropshire Community Health (NHS, 2022) provides a document for parents when their children are being assessed for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD); they utilise Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS) to complete assessments, providing a set of task for the child to

complete. One key thing to note about the set out tasks As outlined by Shropshire Community Health (NHS) these SOGS typically have set tasks to be completed, meaning that the activities are unlikely to be child-led, potentially having an impact on behaviour. Armer-Dougan and Kaszuba (1999) supports the idea of play-based observations as they provide qualitative and quantitative data and provide insights into social development as well as physical, cognitive and emotional development. The utilisation of play observations to support observations of social interactions is supported by Broadhead (2013) who looked at how observations can be made at continuous provision to access information on a child's social ability, rather than more 'formal' methods of obtaining information, where the child is being asked questions or is aware they are being monitored. This method of analysing play to provide a holistic overview of a child's development allows for a covert observation to take place; when observations are covert (a child does not know they are being observed) they are significantly less likely to fall victim to the Hawthorne Effect. The Hawthorne Effect is a difference in children's natural behaviour because they know they are being watched/observed. If this effect comes into play then an observation is skewed as the child is not behaving normally, creating false data. Elston (2021) discussed how this effect is clear in all ages and looks at the effect in relation to medical trials/observations, clarifying that people may tend to behave favourably, especially if they are able to guess the desired outcome of the observation. The Hawthorne Effect, as stated by Elston, is more likely to affect those who typically like to follow protocol, they will modify behaviour to 'fit in' in every day life; this is more likely that they will produce that same 'false behaviour' in an attempt to be correct or 'fit in' with the study.

When using play to observe it is important to note that different behaviours can be seen differently by other people. If an observation is taking place on a child with additional learning needs (ALN) by their one to one support worker, there is a risk of unconscious bias as mentioned previously which could jeopardise the reliability; however, a support worker who spends 36 hours a week with that specific child would have significantly more understanding of behaviours, the why behind certain behaviours, their cues for their needs and a background for frustration. Whereas someone who does not work with this child/has never met this child before will see the behaviours more objectively, but is not going to have the same relationship of

understanding small behaviours like a one to one support worker will. In instances of observation there are positives and negatives to each person observing; the most efficient way to combat this is standardisation. This can typically be done through a pre-agreed “what are we looking for” conversation, having multiple observers, or a more knowledgeable person on a child's behaviours providing insight to potentially ‘unusual’ behaviours. It is important that observations are standardised and non-biased to provide an objective, factual understanding of what is being displayed.

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