

Play in childhood is not only a natural behaviour, but contributes towards their quality of life, well-being and physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. The environments that children play in have an impact on their experiences, choices and relationships. These can be with both people and the environment (Play Scotland, 2023).

For most children, their play is natural and spontaneous, although some may require support from an adult. Playing in this type of way enables them to take risks, gain new ideas and skills, use their imagination and solve problems on their own (Early Years Matters, 2021). Playing in this way allows children to self-direct their own play and learning as they decide what they would like to play with, how they would like to play and when they do it.

Two play theorists who discuss the importance of play are Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Both theorists have different views on what they believe is the importance of play. Firstly, Piaget's theory of play suggests that play and their cognitive development are linked. Piaget says that as children grow and develop, their environments should too. His theory has four stages which are sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and formal operational. He suggests that children will move through these four stages at their own pace and that some will progress quicker than others.

Piaget's theory suggests that children learn best when exploring the world around them in different ways and using their senses. This allows children to explore environments through play and practitioners gain ideas of activities for children to stimulation their senses along with keeping the children engaged and learning (Twinkl, 2021).

Lev Vygotsky then disagreed with Piaget's theory and suggests that children learn independently and continuously. Vygotsky believes that everyone is born with four functions which are attention, sensation, perception and memory. He proposed the importance of the 'zone of proximal development' which he says is the development of skills which can only be obtained by an adult.

The theory implies that imaginary play is important to a child's cognitive, social and emotional development. This type of play allows for children to act out roles and take on rules linked to that role (Twinkl, 2021). An example of this type of play could be the child

becoming a doctor and seeing to an ill patient. This type of play allows children to develop socially and develop the ability to think for themselves (Twinkl, 2021).

Bottril states that play '...should be open ended, give opportunities for self-chosen challenges, offer limitless opportunities and endless interpretations' (Bottril, 2018 p.26).

Bottril says this as every child should be able to play in a way that is self-led and allows them to learn independently in their own surroundings.

Mastery play is the control of physical and affective ingredients in nature. This includes activities such as digging holes, building fires and creating shelters (Play Types, n.d.). Some other examples of mastery play include riding a bike or skating. Children will learn new skills during this type of play and will engage in the activity hours (Education Network, n.d.).

Creative play allows children to design and explore new ideas whilst using their imagination to try out new ideas. It gives children the opportunities to use a variety of tools, props and equipment. This type of play can have a beginning and an end as well as a texture or smell. Children can express themselves through mediums, making things and changing things (Play Types, n.d.).

In an online article by WJEC (2019), they mention different ways in which play can support holistic development. Mastery play can help a child develop holistically by encouraging them to gain self-confidence, make friends whilst developing independence, have the freedom to do what they enjoy and to take risks. WJEC also name different ways that creative play can support a child's holistic development. This can teach children about the world around them, encourage them to explore and experiment (this could be done by children mixing two primary colours to discover a secondary colour), express their feelings (it could through creating models out of play-doh to show how they feel. This would also help the development of fine motor skills) and to develop the ability to concentrate (children can sit down for a certain length and focus on a task).

(Ledendecker, 2020) created a blog article about self-directed linked to a Montessori setting. Self-directed play is when a child is using toys in creative ways with no direct adult interaction. An example that she uses is a cardboard tube. By using a cardboard tubes, it

creates a variety of opportunities for children. They can use the tube as a telescope or a megaphone but could then be transformed into a log or bridge. There are many benefits to self-directed play which include building confidence, encouraging independence, stimulates the imagination, teaches the children problem solving and allows the children to learn at their own pace. These benefits are the starting blocks for children and their development and they all promote a holistic approach in their own ways.

(Caro, 2012) includes in her blog how adults can play in a part in self-directed play and discusses the several ways in which they can play a part without hampering the child's learning. Adults can offer a safe environment for them to learn in which allows them to follow their imagination. Adults can offer support to children during their play but not interrupt. This lets the children discover, invent and explore their play. In the same blog, the author also mentions that adults can support a child's needs by ensuring children have the appropriate clothing. This would be for activities that are based outdoors when conditions may be poor. Another way would be for the child to lead the play with the adult. This means letting the child decide as it is their play. Finally, adults can observe the type of play from a distance to not hinder their concentration. By observing the activity, adults are able to plan out future activities for the child to enhance their learning and to give them more of a challenge.

Play in the early years can be important in a various number of ways and happens all throughout a child's life. In a book named *'Learning through play : for babies toddlers and young children'* by Tina Bruce (2011), she talks about play in babyhood, play during the toddler years and play within the first seven years. When a baby plays, they use their senses of touch, sight, smell, hearing and taste to develop physical coordination. This also encourages them to hold objects, to look at items and reach for them along with putting them in their mouths. Bruce (2011) also mentions how play at this age is enjoyable for the child but is also emotionally and intellectually challenging. This challenge occurs when they are beginning to work put where something belongs, for example, this could be attaching a piece to a puzzle. As a child, they should independently learn about their different sense and self-directed play should be encouraged to let babies explore and learn for themselves without adult intervention.

In the same book, Bruce writes about play during the toddler years and when children begin to walk and toddle about, it is an important time for the development of play. During this time, it may include using props, pretending, imagining and creating props. As a toddler, this could be them self-directing their own play by acting out a scene in a role play environment which encourages them to walk and talk with independence. Through playing, toddlers can work out their identity and start to realise that people are different from them. Similarly to play at babyhood, play in the toddler years allows for independent and self-directed play as they begin to discover who they are and the people around them.

The final area that Tina Bruce talks about is play within the first seven years of a child's life. From the ages of three to seven years children require people who help them play, places to play and materials. At this age in particular, the role of the adult is important in helping children develop play. Adults can support play by observing them to gain knowledge of the child's learning, use observations to support and extend the play to a more challenging environment, create enhanced provisions, engage in the play with the child to encourage communication development (this could be for both verbal and non-verbal children) and to know when to remove themselves from the area to allow for self-directed play.

Kathy Brodie (2017), discusses in an article how practitioners can use observations to link up with a child's interest. Before carrying out any observation, practitioners should consider the reason why they are carrying out the observation so that they can obtain the most appropriate information from it. With any observation that is carried out, practitioners must have permission from someone who has legal responsibility of the child and anyone who is recording the observation must respect the child's wishes.

In the same article, Brodie (2017) names six different observation methods that practitioners can use. These are magic moments, narrative observation, learning stories, time sample observation, tracking and sociogram. The magic moments method is a brief observation that be done with labels or stickers. The narrative observation method, sometimes known as a 'long' observation, is a written account of an activity. It includes observing a child for twenty minutes to an hour and a half to gather as much information as possible. Learning stories are longer observations which are based on the child's interests, level of involvement

persistence and communication. They are written as a story in the first person and explaining what you have observed. A time sample observation is where a practitioner observes a child every five minutes over a set period, this period is usually over an hour. Practitioner would pick up on the activity that the child is engaged in, which area of the setting and the level of involvement. The tracking method requires a floor plan of the setting, including the outdoors. The method allows practitioners to gather information to analyse the areas of the setting that are being used the most by different groups. Finally, the sociogram observation is a less well-used observation which involves monitoring the children that your child is playing with, what they are playing and for how long. The technique can be used throughout the nursery so that practitioners can track the growth of a child's social development.

In a blog post by Larger Family Life (2021), the author discusses how a tracking observation involves following behavioural patterns of a child in a setting. Some examples could be in educational settings, how the child interacts with peers and when the child is performing a specific activity.

The Leuven Scale is a type of assessment that allows practitioners to measure children's emotional well-being and involvement. This monitors the learning, progress and development of the children.

According to Structural Learning (2021), they believe that a benefit of the Leuven Scale is that it is based on meaningful observations which put the children at the centre of the learning. There is research that suggests observation-based instructions are the most effective within early years teaching.

Learning Journals (2021) also discusses an advantage of the Leuven Scale which puts the child in the centre of their own learning. The assessment is an effective way of developing teaching in the early years. The scale focuses on the child and their mental, social and emotional well-being and ensures that the approach does not fall in to the 'one size fits all' category. This gives practitioners the ability to be adaptive towards a child's individual needs.

However, in the same journal article by Learning Journals, they believe that the Leuven Scale does not fully consider children with special educational needs or disabilities. This is because

the behaviours included in the scale are not as obvious or present in special educational needs and disabilities child or a non-verbal child.

Another disadvantage of the Leuven Scale is that by dictating the teaching method, it could reduce or limit the effectiveness and could lead to inaccuracies. Criticism of the scale could also be seen when considering cultural differences in children's behaviour which links with the same criticisms of John Bowlby's theory of attachment. This being that children show different behaviours in different cultures.

In an article by J Howard and K McInnes (2012), they go into detail of when children perceive an activity as, they show more sign of emotion than when they perceive the activity as not play. This statement tells practitioners that when children partake in any type of play, they show more emotion. This would help the practitioner's observation on the child as thorough as possible. Statistics from the observation show that 129 children between the ages of 3 and 5 participated and there were two activities used to differentiate play and not play. Emotional well-being was measured during the process through the Leuven Involvement Scale. The result of the observation shows that there was a significant difference in the levels of emotional well-being shown by the children. The children who chose the 'like play' activity scored higher than those who chose the 'not like play' activity. The conclusion of this activity shows that children have an increase in their emotion well-being when they play rather than not play. The observation highlights the training needs of practitioners to allow them to understand children's views on play. This is useful information which can be utilised to create playful situations to enhance the development of play.

(Daniel Rosa, 2015) wrote an article online with West Sussex County Council about the effective practice of observation, assessment and planning. She discussed that assessment is the process of analysing and reviewing what has been observed and discovering what practitioners know about the child's development and learning. It allows practitioners to ask themselves the question of 'what does our observation and evidence we have collected show'. This can be done through play when practitioners have analysed the different types of play the children have done, look at what the children have learnt, how they have developed and what is something new they have picked up which has not been observed before.

(Play Like Mum, 2023), wrote an online blog about how adults can help with children's play. The author says that adults can support a child's play by planning a fun and appropriate environment which will allow the child to engage in the play. This will allow any observations that will take place to be accurate for the practitioner to assess. The blog also says that an adult can make sure that the child's environment is suitable by focusing on their interests, preferences and abilities. By including these in the planning for an observation, practitioners are able to set play areas which allow the child to self-direct their own play so they can see exactly how the child plays and what the next steps in their development could be.

The blog specifically mentions how adults can observe from a distance instead of jumping in to help. This is sometimes a better way to observe as children will get to learn for themselves and discover their own new experiences. The comments mentioned in this blog are similar to those in the Howard and McInnes article. This is because both discuss how the practitioners took a step back when observing to allow the children to do their own exploring.

A type of intervention that can be used as an observation method for both children and adults is Lego Therapy which Paul Main writes about in this blog. This type of intervention assists children with various communication and social skills challenges. Lego therapy includes children engaging in block play with Lego bricks which strengthens their ability to imaginatively explore and grow their understanding of the world (Main, 2022). It can be used as a good way of observing a child and they are able to see what the child's imagination is like, whether the child is capable of working with others and whether they are able to problem solve. The practitioner is then able to plan future therapy session based off the findings of the observations they have done previously.

Jean Piaget said "play is the work of childhood". Lego therapy represents this as it is a therapeutic way of transforming play in children.

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