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AI statement: No AI was used in this assignment

Sensory Play

The UNCRC article 31 states that play is the right of the child (UNICEF, 2017), and a beneficial play to a child's holistic development is Sensory play. Sensory play refers to activities that engage and stimulate the senses, including touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste. (Action For Children, 2022)

Sensory play supports holistic development in children, as it supports brain development, enhances memory, and aids in problem-solving and complex tasks. Through tactile activities, it helps develop fine motor skills, which are important for tasks such as holding a pen or cutting shapes with scissors. Sensory play also fosters language development, communication, and social skills. It encourages creativity, independent thinking, and emotional regulation, providing a calming effect on children's anxiety or anger. (Action For Children, 2022)

Sight is the most frequently engaged sense for young children. From birth, babies are presented with brightly colored and patterned toys to observe and interact with. Introducing children to new and engaging experiences helps maintain their curiosity about the world. Visually stimulating activities allow them to explore colors, shapes, brightness, and structure while learning how objects move and developing a visual memory of how things function. (Early years resources, 2019)

Sensory play can improve a child's overall wellbeing, as it gives them tools to be able to regulate themselves, for example a child that is overstimulated in the classroom may be able to calm themselves if they have access to a sensory toy such as a fidget spinner.

Sensory play connects to Maslow's hierarchy of needs by helping meet both basic and more complex needs. It supports physical and safety needs by giving children a safe space to explore. It also helps with emotional well-being, reducing stress and making them feel secure, which ties into the need for love and belonging. As children enjoy sensory play, they build confidence and creativity, helping them work toward feeling their best and reaching their full potential. (Weinberg, 2011)

Risky play

Risky play refers to any thrilling activities or experiences that may present a potential risk to a child's safety and could lead to injury. Taking risks is a natural and vital aspect of healthy development. Allowing children to engage in exciting and challenging experiences helps them explore their limits and enhances their learning. (Teaching brave, 2022)

Examples of risky play include; children building bridges/ dens and then testing them out; using sharp or powerful tools and climbing trees or other tall equipment. Adult supervision is an important part of risky play.

High-speed activities involve rapid movements or unpredictable pace that may lead to collisions. Examples include riding bikes, scooters, or skateboards quickly, sliding down steep slides, and running fast, particularly downhill. These activities help enhance reflexes, coordination, and the ability to assess risks, providing important benefits for physical growth. (Brodie, K. 2024)

When considering child developmental theories, risky play links to Vygotsky's theory of the More Knowledgeable Other. Children will learn from observing their peers on how to navigate risky situations, (Johnston, Jane *et al* 2018) i.e the best route when navigating steeping stones through a stream.

Risky play is essential for healthy development and is considered crucial for helping a child reach their 'zone of proximal development.' It allows children to gradually take on more challenging tasks, encouraging growth and skill advancement. (Yalcin.,Erden, 2018)

Johnston, Jane *et al.* (2018) emphasize the importance of risky play, highlighting that children need chances to face risks during play to learn and build confidence in assessing them. The more opportunities children have to engage in such play, the more confident they will become in making decisions, making their play experiences more meaningful.

Risky play supports a child's holistic development by allowing them chances to make their own decisions on risk, which then will boost a child's confidence. We can consider Bowlby's attachment theory in this, as a child that has a secure attachment to a caregiver may be more confident and able to make decisions and assess risk themselves.

Stages of play

Mildred Parten Newhall's stages of play outline how children's play evolves as they grow. It begins with unoccupied play, where infants observe their surroundings without engaging in activities. Then comes solitary play, where children play alone, focusing on their own activities. In the onlooker play stage, children watch others play without joining in. Next, during parallel play, children play alongside others but remain independent, often engaging in similar activities. As they progress to associative play, children start interacting with each other, sharing materials and ideas, though their play is still loosely organized. Finally, in cooperative play, children work together towards a common goal, engaging in group activities with more complex social interactions and roles. (Community Playthings, 2024))

This theory can be compared to Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Both Piaget and Parten Newhall believed children go through certain stages of development and used observation to support their ideas. However, their focuses are different: Parten Newhall looks at how children's social play develops, while Piaget focuses on how their thinking and understanding grow. Also, Parten Newhall's stages cover a shorter age range (birth to 4.5 years), while Piaget's stages go from birth to adolescence. (Brodie, 2024)

Self-directed Play

Self-directed play is initiated and guided by the child, who is inspired by something in their environment, often an object. The desire to play comes from within the child, allowing them to create their own rules and imaginative world. During this type of play, children are often deeply engaged, fully immersed in the activity, and completely focused on what they are doing. (The Steiner Connection, 2022)

Self-directed play helps children grow in many ways. It boosts their confidence as they explore and create their own games. It encourages independence, allowing them to learn how to do things on their own in a safe space. This type of play also sparks imagination, helping them come up with creative ideas and stories. It teaches problem-solving by having them work out their own rules. Children can learn at their own pace, without pressure. (Berkshire Montessori, 2020)

During self-directed play, the adult's role is to support and facilitate children's learning by extending their experiences and providing freedom to explore. They help make play meaningful and ensure inclusive practice, allowing all children to participate. By observing, adults can scaffold children's learning, guiding them as they develop new skills while still giving them the space to lead their own play. (Andrews, 2017)

Adults can support self-directed play by offering open-ended toys and materials that encourage children to use their imagination. Loose parts play helps foster creativity and enhances the quality of play. For example, replacing a basket of plastic toy food with loose parts like pinecones, buttons, fabric strips, and reels opens more possibilities for play. This way, children are not limited to pretending with just food but can create a variety of scenarios, sparking their creativity and exploration.

In loose parts play, adults should ensure safety without limiting children's exploration too much. They should observe the children's play to understand their interests and development, asking open-ended questions to encourage deeper thinking. It is also important for adults to resist the temptation to show children how to use materials, allowing them to discover and create on their own. (Brodie, K. 2024)

A practitioner's role is to ensure that the environment enables self-directed play, for example, by creating a space that is accessible and engaging for young children. This could mean following the Montessori approach, which emphasizes the importance of providing a carefully prepared environment that encourages independence, exploration, and active learning.

The Montessori approach follows the principle that all learning materials should be appropriately sized for children and designed to engage all of their senses. Additionally, it states that each child should have the freedom to move, express themselves, and

utilise their creativity and problem-solving abilities. (BBC, 2023)

Adults can support self-directed play by being aware of the play cycle, knowing the stages of play and understanding when it is appropriate to interrupt a child that is playing. Often, the adult's role is to observe and only join in to resolve conflict, or if invited. It is important that practitioners are respectful of this and have an awareness of 'The Play Cycle.'

The Play Cycle is a tool used by professionals to understand play. It begins with the play drive, the natural urge to play, followed by a play cue, an action that sparks play. The play return is the feedback the child receives. Play flow occurs as the play continues, with cues and returns that can last for a long time. The play frame keeps the play intact, through rules or boundaries. Play ends with play annihilation, when children stop or destroy the play, and play adulteration happens if an adult disrupts or controls the play. (Sands, 2013)

Self-directed play is important as it enables children to have fun, build friendships, and explore their surroundings. It helps them develop essential social, physical, and cognitive skills. Through play, children learn to take risks, make decisions, and form their identity. Unlike structured activities, play is led by children's own interests and ideas, allowing them to express themselves freely. (Play England, 2024)

Observation Methods

Observation involves monitoring children's behavior over time. By documenting these observations in a meaningful and detailed way, educators can identify patterns, plan suitable activities, understand how a child perceives the world, and adjust the learning environment to foster growth and development. (Spreeuwenberg, R. 2022).

Observing is a helpful tool used by researchers and teachers to understand children. The best way to learn about young children's development and learning is by watching them play. By observing play, teachers and researchers can gather information about each child's abilities, interests, and the reasons behind certain behaviors. These observations help inform the most effective teaching methods and ideas for each child. (Neaum, S. 2016)

Observation plays a vital role in early years settings, allowing educators to better understand each child's unique personality, interests, and developmental milestones. The aim of observation is to recognise and support each child's individual growth. By sharing observations, educators can work with parents to set learning goals, identify potential areas where a child may need extra support, and address any concerns.

These observations also provide a foundation for discussing a child's progress with colleagues, parents and other professionals. Capturing key moments helps educators make informed decisions that support the child's holistic development, covering cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth. (Connect Childcare, 2024)

There are many ways to document observation, some examples include taking photographs or videos, Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS), Ages and Stages questionnaires, and trackers such as the movement tracker. There are advantages and disadvantages to every observation type.

In recent years, using photos and videos has become a popular and efficient method of observation, particularly in busy nursery settings. However, a challenge with this approach is that not all families grant permission for their child's photos to be taken, and even images where the child is in the background should be avoided. To address this, many nurseries use techniques such as placing "stickers" over photos to protect the child's identity and ensure privacy.

Narrative observation is a commonly used method of observation as it is easy to use, and practitioners are able to add as much information as needed to the observation. Narrative observations involve creating a detailed description of a child's actions during an activity or over a period of time. This method tracks the events in sequence, giving a clear understanding of the child's behavior, interactions, and learning process. (Connect Childcare, 2024)

There are positives and negatives to narrative observation. Sharman, C *et al* (2015) states that it can be challenging for the practitioner to record everything happening with

accuracy while trying to observe their surroundings. The practitioner may miss important interactions as they write. To make note-taking faster and avoid looking down constantly, the author suggests a practitioner can develop a code which makes writing faster and can be expanded on later once the observation has ended.

Another drawback of narrative observation is that children may become distracted by the practitioner or carer writing, as children are naturally curious and may want to participate, which could interrupt their play. Additionally, older children who are aware of being observed might alter their behavior, acting in ways they believe are expected, rather than behaving naturally.

Narrative observation makes reflecting on a child's development simple as at the end of each observation the practitioner will have documented the 'next step' in their progress. This will demonstrate a clear plan for the child's development, and it will be clear to see any cause for concern.

One advantage of narrative observation is its ability to provide as much detail as needed. Unlike other methods, such as checklists, which are typically used to record specific events or themes (like tracking a child's ability to count to five with a simple yes or no), narrative observation offers a deeper insight. It allows practitioners to capture detailed information about a child's interests, strengths, weaknesses, and social skills. This depth of information is particularly helpful when planning the next steps to support the child's overall development.

Narrative observation is a more holistic approach to observing a child due to the ability to include all the important details.

Role of Play during observation

When conducting observations and assessments of children, recognising the significance of play is essential for ensuring the process is both accurate and insightful. Play is not just an enjoyable activity for children; it serves as a natural and powerful way for them to express their developmental growth, skills, and abilities. By understanding the role of play, educators can improve both the child's engagement and the overall quality of their observations.

When practitioners are conducting observations, it is essential that they do not disrupt the children's play. Children are inherently curious and may become more focused on what the adult is writing or recording than on the activity they are engaged in. Additionally, when taking photographs or videos, children might instinctively pose or exaggerate their actions for the camera. To ensure authentic observations, adults should be discreet and unobtrusive, avoiding drawing attention to themselves during the process. This approach helps maintain the natural flow of the child's play and ensures the accuracy of the observations.

Howard, J. McInnes, K. (2013) conducted a study which demonstrated that children experience greater emotional well-being when they perceive an activity as play rather than as something that is not play. The research had children engage in two different activity sessions, one that was viewed as 'like play' and another as 'not like play.' The findings revealed that children in the 'like play' session demonstrated significantly higher emotional well-being and exhibited more positive behavioral indicators compared to those in the 'not like play' session. This demonstrates that an adult's presence can influence how a child interacts with an activity.

Observing children during play provides practitioners with valuable insights into their developmental progress. For instance, by setting up a farm play scene and watching how the children interact, practitioners can gauge whether the children can recognize

animals, understand the sounds they make, and identify their habitats. Since the children are unaware that they are being observed for these specific skills, their play remains natural and authentic, offering a true reflection of their abilities and understanding.

An example of this is discussed by Bruce, T. *et al* (2015), exploring the author Navarra's findings when observing his son. They state that Navarra emphasized the importance of viewing all data within context and pointed out that spontaneous play provides the most valuable insights into a child's development. He noted that when his son was directly prompted, he gave superficial responses. This highlights the importance of being subtle when observing children, as natural, unforced play offers the most authentic and meaningful understanding of a child's learning and development.

The practitioner must be able to reflect on their observations and put a structured learning plan in place for each child to support their learning. Responsive pedagogy is key to this and ensuring that children are supported through their learning.

Responsive pedagogy involves recognising what children know and can do. Responsive adults observe children's play, interactions, and thought processes, offering appropriate support for their interests and ideas. This includes listening, guiding, asking questions, and encouraging children to reflect on their learning in a cooperative manner. (Birth To 5 Matters, 2021)

When selecting an activity to observe, it is important for the practitioner to have a strong understanding of the child's preferences and dislikes. For instance, a child who dislikes getting messy may not demonstrate their full cognitive abilities during a messy play activity. Similarly, a highly energetic child may struggle with sitting still for reading, which may not accurately reflect their true capabilities. Recognizing these individual differences ensures a more accurate assessment of the child's development. This signifies the importance of inclusive practice when observing children to get a holistic view of their development.

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