

Section 1.

Play is defined as diverse kinds of interactions with others and with objects within different environments (Play Wales, 2023b). The Welsh Government (2020) places great value on play and how important it is to society and the lives of its children. It recognises Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which details the child's right to play and how access to play significantly improves health, well-being, and development (Children's Parliament, 2023). The Welsh Governments Play Policy (2002), the Welsh Government denotes play as a behaviour which is 'freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward'. Furthermore, Childcom Wales (2018) discussed how Wales embraces Article 31 and children's rights in the Spotlight report where Welsh children were surveyed to highlight the barriers to them accessing play opportunities in Wales. Bottrill (2022) states that play should have spontaneity at its heart and should have no restraints. Play should be creative, should show risk, abandon and should be infinite.

Sensory Play

Sensory Play activities help children to learn about their physical selves and the way that they impact upon the world around them. From birth, babies instinctively use smell to identify their primary care giver and from there onwards they rely on their senses to provide relevant information about their environments. Sensory experiences provide the brain with information about sight, sound and tactile sensations and how interactions with these can provide different outcomes (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

Children learn better through experiential learning and sensory play is a good example of this. Senses will work together and provide a good understanding of cause and effect, helping to reinforce the experiences from the outside world (Brodie, 2018).

Action for Children (2022) discuss how sensory play supports brain development by enhancing memory skills and problem solving in addition to supporting language development, communication and social skills. The practitioner can use sensory play as an effective tool for the regulation of emotions. Sensory play has been shown to

provide a calming effect as well as a physical distraction when introduced as an emotional regulator (Gascoyne, 2017). As such, Sensory and messy play is often used as a therapeutic tool for helping children to understand and regain control of their emotions and helps to build confidence, improve communication and self-expression as well as being an enriching and enjoyable experience (Gaikwad, 2015; Gascoyne, 2017).

Sensory-motor development is an important precursor to learning. The way in which a child interacts with the environment will shape the development of the brain and the nervous system. It is important for the practitioner to provide a playful and interactive environment that offers the opportunity for challenge and success (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

It is important to acknowledge all the senses when examining sensory play. The first five are familiar, smell, sight, hearing, touch and taste. The practitioner should ensure to include two other important senses, proprioception and vestibular.

Proprioception is the ability to know where the body is in space so that one can sit down without being able to see behind themselves or pick up an object from the floor without dropping it. Vestibular is having the sense of balance and motion so that one could spin or balance without falling over (Brodie, 2018; Weinstein, 2022).

Heuristic Play

Heuristic play is when children are provided with a number of different objects and receptacles with which they play freely within the play environment. Children can focus for some time exploring what they can do with objects that they find interesting (Nutbrown, 2011). Children can pick objects up, move them about, push, pull, roll, stack, slot, build and many other actions. The child has total autonomy over the play experience (Hughes, 2009).

Tassoni (2011) implies that heuristic play provides opportunities for development in all areas of children's learning as it is an holistic form of play. The nature of the play ensures that the children tap into their imaginations, develop their social skills as they learn to play alongside and with their peers. Fine motor skills are required to handle objects of differing sizes correctly and problem solving is used when making connections about size or capacity (Brodie, 2018).

As defined within the playwork principles the adults role within the play cycle is to help facilitate the play, to observe and to extend the play cycle when appropriate and to evaluate and assess risk in balance with developmental benefit and well-being (Play Wales, 2023a). Howard and McInnes (2013) agree with this when they state that play practitioners need to have a secure understanding of play and their role within it, which should be underpinned by an in depth knowledge of child development. The practitioner should understand that their role is to provide the children with freedom and choice.

Section 2.

Howard and McInnes (2013) define self-directed play as an activity that is chosen and directed by the child. Children will describe play activities as those that are voluntary, fun, within their control and does not include adults. Children generally view adult directed activities as not-play and therefore it is important that the practitioner understands their role as an advocate and facilitator of the child's play experience. Furthermore, McInnes et al (2013) describe how adult presence will affect a child's perceptions of play and playful learning and in some circumstances can inhibit learning. When practitioners can understand the child's perception of play, they can create conditions which help children to view activities and tasks as play which will have a positive effect on the play experience and therefore the child's overall well-being (Howard & McInnes, 2012; McInnes et al 2013).

Self-directed play has many benefits to children, building self-confidence and encouraging independence to name a few. Children can safely express themselves and solve problems and self-directed play has much of its foundation from the Montessori method (Ledendecker, 2020).

Sturrock and Else (1998) introduced the play cycle which aimed to better explain the process of play and to assist play practitioners to understand how they can facilitate a richer play experience. The Play Cycle depicts the stages of play that children move and respond to when engaged in play. It discusses the mental processes that precede play, the cues which the child uses to invite play and the responses to those cues. It highlights the physical and mental constructs that frame the play and describes the flow of play within the process. The practitioner becomes skilled at observing and

responding to the elements of the Play Cycle and can use discretion on the amount of intervention required to extend or facilitate a play experience (Jarvis, George, and Holland, 2013). When a child is absorbed within the play it is referred to as being in play flow. This can last for as little as a few minutes to as much as a number of days. It is very important that the child is allowed to play in this manner and uninterrupted and the practitioner should support this. The play takes place within the play frame. This refers to a real or imagined boundary around the play which may be altered by changing the space, the people, or the play objects which will maintain and possibly extend the play flow (Oxfordshire Play Association, 2015).

The practitioner will communicate both verbally and non-verbally during the play cycle. It is important that adults tune in to the non-verbal cues which are provided by children to be able to fully understand what the children may be thinking or feeling. Similarly, it is important that the adults engage in meaningful communication that makes sense to the child. Howard and McInnes (2013) explain that this communication goes beyond just the vocabulary that the child understands but also refers to the context in which the dialogue is taking place. This is important so that the child can make sense of the communication in time and space. Open ended communication should be used, and the control of the communication should be placed with the child. Non-verbal play cues are communicated with actions and can be in the form of touch, gestures or expression (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

Practitioners should provide well resourced, creative play spaces for children. Spaces that can easily accommodate children's needs and desires. However, this must be accomplished within the constraints of the setting. Howard and McInnes (2013) discuss the importance of play spaces that enable children to have complete control, choice, and freedom with few constraints. However, in contrast, McInnes et al (2011) indicate that providing children with some choice, control and freedom will still enable them to feel playful and to approach activities as play.

Practitioners should be reflecting on their practice and reflecting on the role that they are taking on from the perspective of the child. It is the responsibility of the practitioner to reflect upon whether the child views them as a play partner and to adjust practice accordingly (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

The Playwork Principles establish a professional and ethical framework within which practitioners can develop perspective about the provision of play. Housley Juster (2017) describes the critical importance of self-directed play and explains that this type of play is usually the most absorbing and stimulating play for children.

Whitebread (2012) discusses the role that adults hold within children's play. It is true that adults should provide the materials, spaces, and equipment to encourage the play of children without direct interference, but Whitebread proposes that it is possible for the children to view the adult as a play partner when the adult pays attention, listens to the child, and talks with them, allowing the child to retain control of the play space. Children are much more likely to view the activity as play in these scenarios, and adults can operate as co-players, supporting and extending the play while also protecting the autonomy of the child (Howard and McInnes, 2013; McInnes et al, 2013).

Section 3.

The Foundation Phase profile is a key part of the Welsh Government's Early Years Development and Assessment Framework (EYDAF). Its main objective is to provide a baseline which is used nationally to align children with expected outcomes (Welsh Government, 2017). The profile aims to assess children in the areas of learning from between six and eighty-four months. The profile also supports the communication of findings with parents and carers, making them more involved in the process (Jarvis, George and Holland, 2013). Assessments are the process by which practitioners identify the detail of a child's understanding, their skills, abilities and knowledge. This is used to build a complete picture of a child's development and future learning needs (Nutbrown, 2011).

Observations take place during a variety of indoor and outdoor activities. Children will behave in a different manner and will learn differently when assessed within indoor and outdoor environments and this is reflected within the profile. The assessment process is devised to observe children throughout a mix of adult-led and child-led activities during continuous, enhanced and focused provision within outdoor and indoor environments (Welsh Government, 2017). Howard and McInnes (2013)

agree with this when they state that effective assessment takes place at different times and across a range of activities.

Sharman, Cross and Vennis (1995) state that observations are undertaken so that the practitioner can see if a child is following a pattern. It is also an important opportunity for the practitioner to view in practice what they have read about in theory. Practitioners should have a knowledge of child development before starting to observe children of any age (Brodie, 2018). Careful observations and correct interpretation of behaviours can tell practitioners much about how a child learns. Observing how a child initiates interactions during both structured and unstructured play can provide significant amounts of information (MacBlain, 2015).

By using the national standard of assessment to observe and evaluate children, the practitioner is ensuring that they can see exactly at what stage the child currently sits and can plan ahead and provide targets. The EYFP Profile is used in most mainstream settings throughout Wales and therefore the method is consistent. It is a standardised method of observation and assessment and gives a benchmark to which a child's progress can be compared (Howard and McInnes, 2013). Bromley (2009) states that observing children while they are engaged in a self-chosen activity is a particularly valuable exercise as the child will demonstrate prominent levels of engagement as opposed to a more formal adult-led activity.

However, it should be stated that not all children entering school on the same day are the same age. There can be as much as 10 months difference between starting ages, but yet children will be assessed from exactly the same starting point. For some children, a six week settling period may not be enough (Bateman, 2013, p.52; Early years outdoor learning, 2018). All children are different, and some children may take longer to adapt to new environments and people than others therefore providing an inaccurate baseline for their development (Brooker, 2008; Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017). The EYFP Profile does not really assess for additional learning needs, although it may show that a child has not reached a stage developmentally it does not highlight concerns and early intervention can sometimes be missed.

There are quite large leaps between outcomes. The statements can be confusing and ambiguous. It is important that skills are demonstrated at least twice but due to

time restraints are sometimes evidenced prematurely. Howard and McInnes (2013) draw attention to the limitations of standardised testing and place emphasis on the fact that the process itself can subject young children to unnecessary emotional pressures and can predispose children to feelings of failure. Children can feel under pressure to perform, can panic, or can feel stress under tense formal structures and therefore truer results can be gained from more natural play-based assessments. Furthermore, Bottrill (2022) states that we need to move away from the traditional approach of reliance on baseline assessments and believes that it would be better to take time to observe children and understand properly what motivates them.

Howard and McInnes (2013) have shown that children view tasks that are formal and adult-driven to be definite non-play activities and are therefore less likely to produce accurate results (McInnes et al, 2011).

Howard and McInnes (2013) discuss the ways that misinterpretation can occur during observations and highlight the fact that practitioners can make interpretations out of context, for example, observation of small sections of play rather than the entire episode. In addition, Bromley (2009) identifies the need for interpreting observations to be an intellectual process which relies greatly on theoretical knowledge.

As previously discussed, the EYFP Profile does not draw attention to particular deficits which could lead to early intervention of additional learning needs. Other, more focused, methods of assessment and observation would need to be used to pick up on these (Page, Clare and Nutbrown, 2013).

Section 4

When a practitioner observes a child at play they are able to fully consider both the child's physical and mental development but also how the child's play has developed and changed over time. As children grow and develop they will move from solitary play to play that involves more symbolism and pretence and then on to play that involves more complex cooperation with others and games with rules (Howard and McInnes, 2012; Howard and McInnes, 2013). This movement throughout the play types will demonstrate and reflect the development of skills and abilities across all areas of learning. Understanding of this relationship can give the practitioner the

knowledge to provide experiences to promote a broader repertoire of play behaviours. The practitioner can make judgements about the play behaviour and can identify behaviours that deviate from the expected norms (MacBlain, 2015).

Children will exhibit their highest levels of engagement when they participate in play and therefore observing this can provide the practitioner with a positive measure of their development. When a setting is play-based and child-centred (Howard and McInnes, 2013; Andrews, 2017).

Practitioners who place great emphasis on what children perceive to be play and who have the necessary experience and techniques for reflecting on this are in a prime position to be able to create environments that allow children to feel playful. This, therefore, expedites optimum levels of well-being and maximises chances for development across all fields (Andrews, 2017).

Observing the child whilst at play and engaging in play as a form of therapy have shown a number of benefits to the child. The child can benefit from an increase in confidence and concentration over time. The child is allowed space and time to communicate problems via the play field which they normally may have difficulty in communicating verbally (Schaefer and Kaduson, 2006). Play therapy can help children to work through and process trauma, whilst also encouraging their imagination, creativity, social and communication skills. Children can experiment with the play in a safe and controlled environment, testing out problem solving techniques and learning from mistakes. As a result of being able to explore actions and emotions safely children can learn to become more responsible for their behaviour and to develop successful and healthy coping strategies. This in turn leads to children being able to view respect and acceptance in use and adopting this practice and taking it in to the outside world. Children are provided with a safe space in which to experience and express emotion, to practice and cultivate empathy and respect (Gaikwad, 2015).

Practitioners who use play when they work with children can improve feelings of well-being and boost general development across all areas by ensuring that the experiences and activities offered are such that the children perceive them as play. This is consistent with the playwork principles and non-directive play therapy

practice. It is imperative that practitioners understand the need to emphasise the process of play and how they can facilitate it while also maintaining a playful environment. When children perceive an experience as play it will lead to a greater developmental effect because children are able to workshop scenarios with a reduced risk of failure. Children are able to control the flow and outcome of the play itself and this increases confidence and self-esteem, while also promoting well-being, happiness and feelings of security (McInnes et al, 2013).

The use of play will offer children opportunities to expand their learning and development. From a social and emotional perspective, play can give children a chance to learn about themselves and others, they can explore how their behaviour impacts others and can develop their skills of conflict resolution and friendship building. Play is an excellent method for children to experiment with different social situations where they are able to visit emotions, concepts, ideas and emotions. Play offers the child opportunities to explore all avenues and enhance their development. Vygotsky (cited in Howard and McInnes, 2013) said that 'play creates a zone of proximal development where a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour'. Play presents a most valuable method of assessment because children will usually perform at their peak.

Play offers a fear free environment which is natural in origin and which can be observed at several different times and in many different forms, and when self-chosen and self-directed the child's attention span and interest are piqued and self-regulated (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

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Student Number: 2216886
Word Count: 3220

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