

Children's play: Theory and Practise

Contents

1. Types of play and how they can be supported in practise.
2. The importance for children to choose their own play and the role of the adult in children's play.
3. Observation methods for young children.
4. Role play when taking assessment and observations and how it effects the child's engagement and accuracy of the observation.

AI Statement

There was use of AI in my assignment

"Can you help me with the structure of this paragraph?"

"Can you help me turn this question into a heading for my next section?"

"Can you put my reference list in alphabetical order?"

Types of play and how they can be supported in practise

Play is an important part of a child's life and development. Children consistently express that having time, freedom, and inviting spaces to play is what matters most. When asked what they value most, they highlight opportunities to play and spend time with their friends (Play Wales, 2022).

Child-led learning and adult-led learning can support the development of children in different ways and both have strengths and weaknesses.

Child-led learning allows children to follow their own ideas, act in their own time, and shape play in ways that feel meaningful to them. Child-learning is fun, flexible and full of curiosity, challenge and unpredictability (Play Wales, 2022). This is supported in practise by providing purposeful and authentic experiences, engaging environments, getting to know and understanding each child individually and responding to their likes and dislikes and giving children more autonomy over their learning (NDNA Cymru, 2025). Child-led learning supports holistic development by strengthening children's physical, social, emotional and mental wellbeing through building new and existing friendships, resolving conflict, developing confidence, and problem-solving skills (Play Wales, 2022). There are many benefits to child-led learning. Being active through play supports their overall health and happiness. Child-led learning helps children make sense of their world, feel connected to their communities, and develop a strong sense of identity and belonging. It also lays foundations for learning by strengthening brain development and critical thinking (Play Wales, 2022). The Non-maintained Nursery Curriculum for Wales emphasises a child-centred approach, giving children the time, space and freedom to deepen their learning through play. This allows them to return to experiences, revisit ideas and gradually refine their developing knowledge and skills (Welsh Government, 2022). Froebel (1887), also emphasised the idea of giving children freedom supported by guidance, allowing them to explore independently while benefiting from a responsive adult. The Enabling Learning approach highlights that practitioners should carefully judge when and how to step in, offering support that helps children make sense of their experiences. They should encourage and support learners to begin to work collaboratively to solve problems (HWB, 2026).

Adult-led play refers to learning experiences that are intentionally planned and guided by the practitioner to support specific developmental goals. According to the Early Years Alliance, the adult plays a key role in planning and guiding play to support specific learning outcomes (Early Years Alliance n,d). The adult acts as the facilitator who allows play to happen, a scaffolder who supports the development and offers help, modelling and prompting and a teacher who leads high-quality learning experiences. This can be supported in practise by adults planning purposeful activities with clear learning intentions, ensuring that the experiences they provide help children develop specific skills or knowledge supporting the child's cognitive and social development. They also prepare targeted resources and guide children through structured experiences, introducing new ideas and supporting them to practise emerging skills which contributes to their communication, language and physical development (Connect Childcare, n.d). Connect Childcare (n.d) says, the benefits of adult-led play include offering a personalised learning experience based on each child's developmental needs, giving them focused support to practise skills and build a strong foundation of knowledge that makes tasks more achievable. It also helps children develop confidence, as experiencing success encourages them to take on new challenges. In addition, adult-led activities can spark curiosity by introducing children to new ideas and experiences, motivating them to explore and continue learning (Connect Childcare, n.d).

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory explains that children learn through social interaction and language and culture shape their thinking. He emphasised the importance of both child-initiated and adult-led play, as adults can observe children closely and step in at the right moment to scaffold learning. Through support from a practitioner or teacher, children progress in the Zone of Proximal Development, gaining independence when practising new skills (WJEC, 2021).

The six stages of play help practitioners understand how children move from unoccupied play through to cooperative play. Pathways.org (n.d) explains that children in parallel play may benefit from child-led play as they play alongside others, engrossed in their own play but aware of others around them (Pathways.org, n.d). However, children in cooperative play may benefit from adult-led play allowing the children to play together to achieve shared outcome. At this stage, practitioners can help children

to share, turn-take and understand the concept of winning and losing (Pathways.org, n.d). The Non-Maintained Nursery Curriculum highlights the role of enabling adults who observe children closely and respond to their interests. This supports child-led learning, as experiences are shaped around what matters to each child. The curriculum also promotes engaging, purposeful experiences where adults step in to guide, model and scaffold learning when needed, linking to adult-led approaches that help children develop new skills (Hwb, 2022).

Both types of play have strengths and weaknesses but, both support UNCRC Article 31: Right to Play (United Nations, 1989).

The importance for children to choose their own play and the role of the adult in children's play

Building on child-led play and adult-led play and how it can be supported in practise, it is important to consider why children need opportunities to choose their own play and how the adult supports and extends this play.

Self-directed play refers to play that children choose and control themselves. They decide what to do, how to do it and create their own rules, following their own interests and motivations. This type of play is widely recognised in childhood studies because it supports problem-solving, creativity and self-discovery, allowing children to explore freely without pressure or fear of getting things wrong. Self-directed play can take many forms, including physical, cognitive and social play (Aminpour, Bishop and Corkery, 2020). Physical play might involve activities such as dancing, running games, hopscotch or rough-and-tumble play, where children invent their own movements and rules. Sports are not included because adults set the rules (Aminpour, Bishop and Corkery, 2020). Cognitive play often includes constructive activities, such as building dens or creating structures, where children plan, experiment and work towards a chosen goal. Social play becomes increasingly important as children grow and can range from watching others play to playing alongside them, joining in shared activities or taking part in cooperative or competitive group play (Aminpour, Bishop and Corkery, 2020). This aligns

with the Curriculum for Wales, which highlights the importance of child-centred, play-based learning where children have freedom to explore and follow their own interests (Welsh Government, 2022).

Adults can support self-directed play by being the enabling adult, creating engaging experiences in an effective environment. The Non-Maintained Nursery Curriculum for Wales (NMNC) guidance says, the role of the enabling adult is to create emotionally safe environments where children feel secure, confident and supported to express their feelings. Practitioners are encouraged to follow the children's interests, support curiosity and make best use of the teachable moments (Welsh Government, 2022). Enabling adults model compassion and kindness as well as support during transitions and changes in their daily routines. They also respect children's decisions, choices and strengthen their sense of belonging (Welsh Government, 2022). The NMNC, highlights that children need hands-on, purposeful and meaningful learning experiences to encourage independence, challenge and offer risk. Experiences may develop from children's own choices or from current interests and should support holistic development across physical, social, emotional and cognitive areas (Welsh Government, 2022). Experiences should be carefully planned to develop children's attention and listening skills both the indoors and outdoors (Welsh Government, 2022). Effective environments are central to supporting self-directed play. The NMNC Wales guidance states that environments should be flexible, inclusive and responsive to children's needs offering a balance of physical, creative and imaginative opportunities (Welsh Government, 2022). According to Adams and Short (2023), the environment should offer resources that children can choose independently that will help them to develop and sustain their play. The layout and the space are carefully planned so children can explore freely. Open-ended materials encourage curiosity and investigation, allowing for many possible outcomes. Children with additional needs may use resources in creative ways (Adam and Short, 2023). Birth to 5 Matters highlights many key point as to why self-directed play is important. All children have the right to play, and it is included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (1989). Play is central to children's wellbeing, development and learning, whether it happens indoors or outdoors. Children are naturally drawn to play because it is enjoyable and gives them the chance to take part in a wide range of experiences with others (Early

Education, 2021). When they follow what interests them, they become fully absorbed, learning about themselves, other people and the world around them. Play is flexible and open-ended, children can explore ideas, take risks and challenge themselves without worrying about getting things wrong (Early Education, 2021). During play, children often reach deep levels of involvement as they use what they already know and combine ideas in new ways. With access to open-ended resources they build on existing learning, make new connections and gain a deep understanding of concepts (Early Education, 2021). In an enabling environment, children decide what to play, how to play and who to play with. An outdoor space can provide opportunities to share ideas and feelings with others which often creates new elements of play as well as the challenge of communicating ideas to each other (Early Education, 2021).

Observation methods for young children

According to Arnerich M (2021), the Leuven scale is an observation tool that is useful for assessing the well-being and involvement of children and young people in early years settings. Having high levels of well-being and involvement allows for deep learning and development. The scale uses two separate scoring, one for involvement and the other well-being. Each scale ranges from Level 1 to Level 5 (Arnerich M, 2021).

Level 1 (Extremely Low)

Well-being – Unhappy, anxious, shows no sign of pleasure and may struggle to engage with the environment.

Involvement – Appears absent-minded, activities are short lived, easily distracted and may not pay attention to their surroundings.

Level 5 (Extremely High)

Well-being – Express emotions that are mostly positive, enjoy their environment with fun, laughter and interaction with peers and show signs of emotional regulation.

Involvement – Highly engaged in activities, make decisions quickly without hesitation and demonstrate focus, interest and commitment (Arnerich M, 2021).

Practitioners use the Leuven Scale to observe children over time, identify those who may need additional support, and reflect on how the environment or teaching approaches can be improved. The Research Centre for Experiential Education (RCEE) has produced a list of 10 action points that help practitioners focus the learning environment on the well-being and involvement of pupils (Lewis K, n.d). These action points include, rearranging the classroom into areas of interest, ensuring areas are resourceful and offer challenge, introduce new materials and activities bases on the children's interests and identify children with developmental and emotional needs and provide appropriate intervention (Lewis K, n.d).

The Learning Journal (n.d) explains that one of the main benefits of the Leuven Scale is that it is observation based and keeps the child at the centre of the learning. It focuses on a child's mental, social, and emotional well-being as well as their involvement, it avoids becoming a "one size fits all" approach (Learning Journal, n.d). Instead, it encourages practitioners to be adapt and respond to what each child needs. Another big advantage is that it gives childcare professionals and parents a simple, practical, and consistent way to measure engagement and learning. Even though it is science based, it is still easy to use in everyday practice (Learning Journal, n.d). This this linked to the work of Ferre Laevers who developed the Leuven scale and believed that well-being and involvement are central to children's learning and development (Twinkl, n.d). However, The Learning Journal (n.d) also says, the Leuven Scale does have limitations. A common criticism is that it does not always work well for children with special educational needs or disabilities (Learning Journal, n.d). The behaviours described in the scale may not be as obvious in SEND children, especially those who are non-verbal, which can make the observations less accurate. (Learning Journal, n.d). Cultural differences can also affect how children show well-being and involvement, meaning the scale may not capture every child's experience fairly. John Bowlby's Theory of Attachment (Bowlby, J 1969) and the Leuven scale that have many of the same criticisms. One being, they both assume that children show their emotions and feelings in the same way.

The Leuven scale focuses mainly on well-being and involvement, and these areas are central to Ferre Laevers work. As mentioned previously, Ferre Laevers believed that

these areas are central to children's learning and development (Twinkl, n.d). A limitation of the Leuven scale is that it does not assess physical, social, cognitive or communication development, therefore, the Leuven scale itself can not be fully holistic. However, Laevers and Declercq's (2018) research argues that levels of well-being show whether children are thriving in their social-emotional development, and whether their basic physical and emotional needs are being met (Laevers and Declercq, 2018). Laevers and Declercq (2018) explains that the overall goal is to develop unique potential, strengthen social-emotional health, encourage exploration, and develop a sense of "linkedness" with themselves, others, society, the material world and nature (Laevers and Declercq, 2018). This shows that although the scale has a focus on two areas, it is based on a holistic view of child development and build a picture overtime. The Welsh Government (2023) agrees with Ferre Laevers theory as it explains that the progress of every child is unique and is linked to high levels of well-being, involvement and positive dispositions to learning (Welsh Government, 2023).

The role of play during observations and assessments of children and how it affects the child's engagement and the accuracy of the observation.

Babies and young children are born curious about the world around them and will have strong internal needs to explore and play. The PACEY Cymru (2025) guidance explains that observing children in their play helps practitioners to understand the child's needs, behaviours, preferences, well-being and interest (Coram PACEY, 2025). Observations can be 'in the moment', they do not have to be formal and planned. When practitioners keep children's developmental needs at the centre of their practice and value their individual differences, they gain a deeper understanding of each child and can create environments to support progress (Coram PACEY, 2025). Play also supports child centred 'in the moment' planning as it considers the child's interests and preferences shaping the experience offered to them. Effective observation during play helps practitioners build a holistic picture of each child, understand their behaviours and skills, plan meaningful next steps, and identify when further support may be needed

(Coram PACEY, 2025).

The Coram PACEY (2025) guidance explains that by standing back, observing, and then intervening and supporting appropriately allows adults to see how children explore ideas, solve problems and engage in sustained shared thinking with others (Coram PACEY, 2025). Observing children in play gives us a more accurate reflection of where they are in their development as children demonstrate their learning and understanding in many ways that has meaning to them (Early Education, 2021). Birth to Five Matters highlights that sensitive, responsive adults notice the thinking behind children's actions by listening, guiding, asking questions and co-constructing learning with them (Early Education, 2021). This helps practitioners understand not only what children can do, but how they learn. We know this when children use skills and concepts they have mastered in many ways during their independent play, their understanding is noticeably embedded (Early Education, 2021).

Froebel Trust (2021) says, adults have a vital role to play as observers but may have a different role in the observation. The adult may stand back and observe or interact and play along side to support and extend play. Adults make a big difference to children's learning, and Froebel believed this support should come from understanding each child's needs and initial experiences. This means helping children use what they already know in different ways, while also giving them chances to build on and extend their learning (Froebel Trust, 2021). Froebel emphasised that adults should be knowledgeable about child development, the importance of play and have the ability to guide children to develop holistically with freedom and experiences that embed the learning (Froebel Trust, 2021). The Welsh Government (2023) assessment arrangement guidance tells us that children should be observed by more than one practitioner, and observations should be shared and practitioners should collaborate to ensure assessments are accurate and holistic (Welsh Government, 2023). The Froebel Trust (2021) agrees and says, observations may reflect unconscious bias as they are subjective and based on our own interpretation. Practitioners have a responsibility to prevent stereotyping children by gender, race, ethnicity, religion, cultural background, economic circumstances, household income, home language or disability (Froebel Trust, 2021). However, as well as being aware of unconscious bias, we must also be aware of changes in a child's behaviour when being observed by an adult. McInnes, *et al* (2013) research had found

that children define their play using cues and one important cue is whether an adult is present. Children are less likely to view an activity as play if an adult is near and it is suggested that adult interactions may influence how children use this cue (McInnes, *et al*, 2013). Schema's also highlight why observing children in self-initiated play is important. The Froebel Trust (2021) explains that "babies and young children can be observed repeatedly moving up and down, back and forth, side to side, or round and round, enveloping, transporting and enclosing in their play and exploration. This process of repetition helps children to experiment as they explore their thinking through their actions" (Froebel Trust, pg 22, 2021). Chris Athey (1990) research focused on encouraging adults to observe what children do and become more aware of how they respond and interact with them, as being able to identify repeated behaviour enables adults to support and enrich children's play with new resources and experiences (Froebel Trust, 2021). Observing children in play gives a more accurate reflection of their development. As the Welsh Government (2023) and Froebel Trust (2021) emphasise, shared, reflective observation of children's natural behaviours supports more valid and holistic assessment.

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