

Children's Play

Word count 2941

Table of Contents

Types of play – pages 2 and 3
The importance of self-directed play – pages 4 and 5
Observation methods of children – pages 6 and 7
The role of play during observation and assessment of children – pages 8 and 9
Reference list – pages 10 and 11
Appendix – page 12

Types of Play

Bottril (2018 p.26) defines play as being creative without limitation. Play is an opportunity to take risks, discover inner curiosity and explore the world around you. Play is fundamental for children's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development, supporting the holistic development of a child. Play contributes to achieving every level of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs making play a basic human need. Physical play promotes good health and well-being. Physical play builds healthy muscles and bones supporting the development of fine motor skills. Running, jumping, skipping develop gross motor skills and keep children active. When children play with peers and adults, they form friendships and build relationships. This enables children to feel loved and form attachments. This supports social and emotional development as they learn other children's feelings and needs. Play nurtures imagination allowing a child to discover who they are. Play allows children to express their emotions and feelings through language, facial expressions and moving their bodies. Play supports self-esteem allowing children to feel a sense of purpose and achievement. UNICEF (2024) outlines in article 31 that play is an essential need for every child. Play allows children to discover their interests, what they like and dislike shaping their identity as individuals. Play allows children to develop life skills such as problem solving and critical thinking. Research from multiple theorists supports the importance of play for children. Piaget believes children are active learners who develop cognitive skills through play. However, Vygostky developed a theory suggesting that play allows children to learn while interacting with others. Children learn from those around them. Vygostky believes that play supports cognitive development by developing language and conceptual thinking. (Simply Psychology, 2024)

There are many types of play including physical play, locomotor play, imaginative play, role play, object play, therapy play and social play. I am going to discuss the benefits of exploratory play and creative play. Play Wales (2017) identifies that exploratory play is when a child explores the world around them using all their senses. Exploratory play is crucial for brain development as it allows children to develop concentration skills. Exploratory play also supports physical development. Through reaching/ holding different objects children develop fine motor skills and

hand-eye coordination. Practitioners can encourage explorative play by providing an activity of treasure baskets filled with a variety of objects. This is a fun activity that will promote curiosity and engage children. Through looking, touching and listening to objects children develop their five senses. Other activities that support explorative play are sand, water and messy play.

According to Wilson (2018) creative play involves children having the opportunity to express themselves. This supports intellectual development by allowing children to develop confidence and critical thinking, important skills needed to empower children to make decisions independently. Research shows that children who have been provided with creative play are more likely to listen and follow instructions in school. (Red Monkey, 2020) Practitioners can encourage creative play through activities such as drawing, painting, building, cutting and modelling. Creative play nurtures imagination, allowing children to express themselves and discover who they are. Practitioners can use simple materials and objects including bubble wrap, tin foil, fabric, paper, clay, cardboard and loose parts. By providing the materials children can then take the lead exploring and using imagination to create their own ideas. Creative play supports emotional development by helping children to understand their feelings and express how they feel. Creative play also supports social development as children can share their ideas with others around them.

Every child is unique and will play in different ways. Parten developed a theory that there are different stages of how children play. These include unoccupied play, solitary play, parallel play, onlooker play, cooperative play and associate play. (Brodie, 2024) This has provided practitioners with knowledge and understanding of how to recognise children's social development through play. As children become older, they engage in more social types of play. Practitioners recognise the importance of providing a variety of play types indoor and outdoor that support different parts of learning. The Play Sufficiency Duty in Wales 2012 outlines children's rights to have opportunities of play. It is the responsibility of practitioners to regularly assess and improve play provisions within their setting. (Play Wales, 2022) Through providing enabling environments where children have the freedom to make their own choices allowing them to explore and experiment. This is important to develop independence and shape who children become in the future, supporting one

of the core purposes of the Curriculum for Wales that children become ambitious, capable learners. (Welsh Government, 2024)

The importance of self-directed Play

Self-directed play happens when children independently decide what, how, where and who they play with. This provides children with opportunity to freely explore and discover their interests. (The Montessori school of the Burkschires, 2024) There should not be any restrictions around self-directed play, allowing children to take the lead and follow their own curiosity in the moment. Montessori believes that play should be centred on the child and open ended. There is no specific end goal or planning involved from adults, children are simply initiating play in their own way for their own reasons. This allows children to have fun and enjoy play. Self-directed play is natural, not forced or influenced by adults. Having the freedom to choose play allows children the opportunity to develop self-confidence as they make choices and feel empowered. (Birthto5matters)

Adults can support self-directed play by providing children with a safe enabling environment which has open space. Children need space to support movement and physical development. Adults need to provide children with the time, freedom and choices to initiate their own play allowing the child to personally direct their play. The adult's role is to stand back and let children develop their own imagination and ideas. Allowing children to make their own rules and decisions. The Reggio Emilia approach highlights how the environment plays a fundamental role in children learning as it resembles being a third teacher. (Robson and Mastrangelo, 2017) This provides children the opportunity to have hands on experiences, learning as they experiment and explore. Adults must ensure children are provided with the opportunity to play indoor as well as outdoor. Children learn in the environment around them therefore adults need to provide a variety of learning opportunities that encourage children to be active participants in their learning. The role of the adult is to provide positive learning environments, adapting to ensure it is inclusive for all children. Dr Darling-Hammond believes that when children are in a calming, peaceful environment with aspects of nature around them brain architecture is developed enabling children to learn more. (Creating a Positive Learning Environment, Youtube) The role of adult is to observe and discover what the children like doing. Adults can

then consider what resources and materials they could provide to enhance this learning opportunity further. This can include simple items such as loose parts, paper, cardboard tubes, blankets. Children then have the freedom to use these materials to make and build things, developing creativity. Adults can use the play cycle theory to understand how to support self-directed play. If a child wants an adult to be involved, they will offer a play cue in which the adult can then respond to. This could include the child making a verbal cue, using body language or making eye contact with an adult. It is important the adult does not interrupt play and disrupt play. When an adult becomes too involved in play it can lead to adulteration. Sands (2013) identifies this happens when adults want to improve play, force play or lead play. The role of the adult is to know when to step in and provide guidance whilst still ensuring the child has freedom.

Research shows that self-directed play helps to develop the whole child. According to The Steiner Connection (2022) self-directed play is fundamental in supporting child development because it enables children to take the lead in their learning developing independence and problem-solving skills. Self-directed play supports the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of a child. Playing with others allows children to learn skills such as sharing and negotiating. Play allows children to learn about the world around them, how things work and why they work that way. This is crucial to developing curiosity and creativity. Learning through play supports the Curriculum for Wales. By simply dropping a ball to the floor a child learns about gravity and physics. Through mixing elements such as water and sand children learn chemistry. Play is an opportunity for children to experiment and overcome failure. This builds resilience and enables children to develop practical skills such as problem solving and risk-taking. Self-directed play without limitations allows children the opportunity to learn at their own pace without fear of failing. Through self-directed play children experience self-discovery and feel empowered. Play supports children in becoming healthy and confident individuals as outlined in the Curriculum for Wales. (Welsh Government, 2024)

Adults can support play through providing a safe environment with inclusive play opportunities.

Observation methods of children

Observations include intentionally noting down what you see children do. (Connect Childcare, 2024) This allows educators to understand the holistic development of the child. Observing children shows the practitioner the child's individual strengths, weaknesses, interests and interactions allowing practitioners to gain understanding of each child individually. Observations allow practitioners to understand individual behaviours and interactions with other children. Practitioners can use this knowledge to plan meaningful activities that children will enjoy. Without observing practitioners do not have knowledge of what a child dislikes and cannot build positive relationships. Birthto5matters highlights how observation is a crucial part of assessing and planning. Through observing practitioners determine if children are meeting developmental milestones and progressing across the seven areas of learning or whether there are signs of weaknesses or development delays. Practitioners can identify how children communicate and if language is developing accordingly. Practitioners are then able to provide an enabling environment and effective practice that meets the individual needs of each child. Practitioners use documented information from observations to collaborate with parents and multi agencies to provide additional support tailored to the needs of the child. Working in partnership is fundamental to provide the best outcome for the child. According to Johnston (2018) observation includes more than just looking. It requires practitioners to watch children closely, listen, discuss with colleagues and question what the observation tells them about the child. The role of the practitioner is to consider what the child is doing, why they did it that way and what are they learning during the process. Observation is an important part of reflection. Practitioners can ensure the learning experiences they are providing are working and benefiting children. Reflecting can improve planning by identifying if any changes can be made to enhance learning further. Reflecting also allows practitioners to consider if the routines in their room are effective. Method observations in practice link to the curriculum of Wales, ensuring children are progressing accordingly to their individual needs and practitioners have a focus on how to support learning. (Welsh Government, 2024)

One method of observation used by practitioners is Narrative observations. Connect Childcare (2024) defines this as a thorough written account of what you specifically notice during a child playing. The main benefit of this method is that you gain a holistic understanding of the child's learning. A practitioner can determine what interests the child and motivates them. It will show any patterns of behaviour and interactions with others. Practitioners can identify how children communicate with others, how they share and play with others, allowing practitioners to understand the child's social and emotional development. Practitioners can then use this knowledge to identify specific needs and interests of the child. Narrative observations are accurate documentations of experiences and milestones. Having descriptive information recorded in time and dates allows practitioners to easily track progress in learning areas. This is important to assess children effectively and identify the areas in learning that need further support. (Welsh Government, 2024)

A disadvantage of narrative observations is that it can be time consuming for the practitioner. This can limit the number of other observations the practitioner can carry out in the same day. A weakness in this observation method is that it relies on the practitioner's interpretation. This has the possibility to create subjective biases if the practitioner has a very close bond with the child. A limitation to this method could also be that an older child will know that they are being observed. If a practitioner is holding a pen and clipboard and writing in front of them. This can cause children to act and behave differently known as the Hawthorne effect. Children may adjust or improve their behaviour when they know they are being watched. (Simply Psychology, 2024) This research suggests that to gather a true reflection of the child, it would be better to observe in secrecy when the child does not know.

There are many methods of observation practitioners can use. It is important practitioners take time to consider what method suits the reason that they are observing the child. For example, if a practitioner is looking to observe the social development of a child the best observation method to use for this is an interaction tracker. According to Connect Childcare (2024) all observations carried out by practitioners should have meaning and purpose. Observing how a child learns allows practitioners to see what children understand about the world around them. Practitioners can then identify specific needs, plan meaningful activities and improve the environment to support the growth and development of every child.

The role of play during observation and assessment of children

Play is important during observing as the child makes decisions allowing practitioners to follow their pathways. This allows practitioners insight to the child's likes/dislikes and interests. Observing a child playing shows insight into what the child enjoys doing and what intrinsically motivates them to learn. Practitioners use this information to support development by creating a curriculum tailored to suit the needs, abilities and interest of the child. (Welsh Government, 2023) Play is a natural instinct, therefore observing a child during play reflects their unique self. Observing children playing shows an insight into behaviour and responses. It is important practitioners observe how children respond to adults, other peers and activities. This can help identify any additional learning needs or behavioural needs. Every child is unique and will enjoy play differently. Khanom explains how every child has different approaches to expressing creativity. (Unicef parenting) One child may prefer physical activities such as climbing while another child may prefer reading. It is the role of the practitioner to know children individually and respond to the interests of each child, making adaptations to the environment ensuring it is suited to the ages and abilities. Research shows if a child is having fun during play, it makes them feel happy supporting positive well-being. Unicef parenting identifies how play releases endorphins into the body which reduces anxiety and stress in children. This is significantly important for children who live in poverty and deprived areas. The Child Poverty Strategy for Wales (2011) recognises that play develops resilience and supports children's mental health.

However, when practitioners observe the way in which children play it is important to consider that play behaviours vary. Play behaviours vary due to the age and development of the child. The information gathered during one observation may not be completely accurate. As a result, multiple observations are needed to give an accurate reflection of development. Factors that can also cause a child to behave and engage differently during play include the environment and transitions. Adults can support play through providing a safe environment where all children feel a sense of belonging. Cultural differences can influence how a child plays. Dr Ramsey identifies how children's value and beliefs embedded by culture will impact the way

they play. (Cultural Influences on Children's Play, Youtube) Children who live in rural areas have more freedom and space to enjoy time outdoors exploring nature and wildlife while children who live in cities are more restricted to outside play. Culture can affect how children show emotions and feelings. Different cultures have different interpretations of play and why play is important depending on their beliefs and values. Practitioners can support this by valuing and respecting cultural diversity of every child, ensuring play is relevant and inclusive.

Adults can obtain an accurate understanding of how children are developing by using a variety of observation methods. This allows a practitioner to gain a reliable in depth understanding of the child and gain a holistic view. It is the role of the adult to recognise when a child needs further support. It is fundamental children who need additional support are identified early. Resources and intervention may be needed to support additional needs. For children to engage in learning it is important they are in a nurturing and supportive environment where they have a variety of play opportunities. Moyles (2010) identifies that children are more likely to engage and learn through first hand experiences. The role of the adult is to ensure children have an enabling environment with a variety of open-ended resources accessible to all. Sharing information gathered during observations with parents/coworkers further supports the development of the child. This gives parents the knowledge and understanding to support learning at home. It is also important the knowledge of parents/carers is considered during assessing children as this allows for a deeper insight and understanding. Inviting parents to share information about their culture and traditions can help practitioners to understand the interests and values of the child. Partnership working achieves enhances learning and development, achieving the best outcome for the child. (Birthto5matters)

References

- Birthto5matters. Available at: <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/observation-assessment-and-planning/> (Accessed 19th January 2025)
- Bottril, G. (2018) *Can I go and Play now? Rethinking the Early Years*. London: Sage.
- Brodie, K. (2024). 'Mildred Parten Newhalls Six Stages of Play in Early Years'. [Mildred Parten Newhall's 6 Stages of Play in Early Years](#)
- ConnectChildcare. (2024). 'Effective EYFS Observation Methods in Early Years Education'. [Effective EYFS Observation Methods in Early Years Education](#)
- Cultural Influences on Children's Play. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lANWHxKtfc&t=5s> (Accessed 18th January 2025)
- Education Wales. Early childhood play, learning and care: Developmental pathways 0 to 3. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/56774946-48aa-4fab-adda-f27508d8dc8f/early-childhood-play-learning-and-care-developmental-pathways-0-to-3.pdf>
- Edutopia. Available at: [Creating a Positive Learning Environment - YouTube](#) (Accessed 8th January 2025)
- Johnston, J. (2018) *Early childhood studies*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge.
- Moyles, J.R. (2010) *The excellence of play*. 3rd ed. Maidenhead (England): Open University Press.
- Play Wales. (2018) 'Playing and Hanging Out' Available at: <http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playinghangingout> (Accessed 4th January 2025)
- Play Wales. (2022). 'Current Play Policy in Wales'. [Current play policy in Wales - Play Wales](#) (Accessed 18th January 2025)
- Red Monkey Play. (2020) [Why Is Creative Play Important For Children's Development?](#) (Accessed 5th January 2025)
- Robson, K. and Mastrangelo, S. (2016) 'Children's Views of the Learning Environment: A Study Exploring the Reggio Emilia Principle of the Environment as the Third Teacher', *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 42 (4), pp. 1-16.
<https://doi.org/10.18357/jcs.v42i4.18100>.
- Simply Psychology. (2024) [Hawthorne Effect In Psychology: Experimental Studies](#) (Accessed 18th January 2025)
- Simply Psychology. (2024) [Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory Of Cognitive Development](#) (Accessed 4th January 2025)

The Montessori School of the Burks. (2024). 'Why encourage self-directed play?'. [Why Encourage Self-Directed Play?](#) (Accessed 8th January 2025)
The Steiner Connection. (2022). 'Self-Directed play in the Waldorf Kindergarten'. [Self-Directed Play in the Waldorf Kindergarten – The Steiner Connection](#) (Accessed 8th January 2025)

Unicef [How play strengthens your child's mental health | UNICEF Parenting](#) (Accessed 19th January 2025)

Unicef parenting. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/child-care/what-is-free-play> (Accessed 19th January 2025)

Unicef. (2024) *Children's Rights*. Available at <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/> (Accessed 4th January 2025)

Welsh Government. (2024). Supporting learner progression. [Supporting learner progression assessment guidance - Hwb](#) (Accessed 17th January 2025)
Welsh Government. 2024 [Child Poverty Strategy](#) (Accessed 18th January 2025)

Wilson, R.A. (2018) *Nature and young children: encouraging creative play and learning in natural environments*. Third edition. London: Routledge.

Appendix

I have not used AI in this document.