

Childrens play: Theory and Practice

Section 1

Psychologist Jean Piaget noted that ‘Play is the work of childhood’ (Play, Learn, Thrive, 2023).

Play is how a child interacts and makes sense of the world around them. Children will naturally play when given the time, space and freedom whilst enjoying the environment they are in and with the people around them (Play Scotland, 2023).

Wales is the first country in the world to recognise play as such a duty within its legislative framework, ensuring Wales is a play friendly country benefitting all children. (Welsh government, 2014). Additionally, it is recognised internationally and is a known human right that is evident in the convention of the rights of the child (UNCRC). Article 31 outlines every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts (Scottish government, 2013).

Isaacs (1933) stated that play is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated that will encompass children's behaviours in play. Isaacs believed in the importance of play and that it should be free and unfettered (Pound, L. 2005).

According to Glover (1999) through how children interact with their environment, play allows children to build on their knowledge and extend each of their skill areas. Sutton-Smith (1999) agreed and found that when children play in what they view as possibly a mundane or frightening world, they will create a new and more pleasant one. Children do this whilst using their imagination and actively engaging with creativity and experimentation. These common characteristics in children's play give them lots of enjoyment in what they are doing by choosing how and what to play (Brown, F and Patte, M, 2013).

During play children learn about and begin to understand their immediate worlds, developing self-image and self-esteem. Through playing a child's holistic development is strengthened in providing them with a safe and secure base for exploration, interpretation and investigation of the world they live in. (Play Wales, 2023)

One would agree that children's development and play naturally complement each other. Vygotsky (1978) was one researcher who emphasised how children actively learn in a social setting as this enables them to learn from others, develop socially acceptable behaviour, value and build friendships (C, Macintyre. 2001).

Social play involves interaction with peers that involve conversations, creating and making things together, understanding rules and taking turns. These childhoods play experiences are crucial social skills where sympathy and empathy are also learnt. Social play occurs on many levels of learning for a child and is viewed as the most dominant of all play types that children engage in and is seen as the most observed at a play setting (Play Wales, 2017). Froebel, Steiner and Montessori all felt children in mixed groups of ages encouraged social development, and how the importance of allowing children's natural curiosity of other children would foster social awareness (Bruce, T. 2011).

Different spaces such as outdoor areas can promote relationships and interactions between children. These rich spaces of circular hollows or barrels can be the perfect space for friendships to flourish that inspire talking together. Seating areas that face inwards will encourage communication. (Tovey, H. 2007)

Playgrounds are excellent places to encourage social play and has other huge benefits for holistic development. Outdoor play offers new experiences that can encourage curiosity, wonder and improve physical development. (Health information, advice, support and services, 2022) The outdoor space should be a well-considered environment that has been planned for with natural or man-made materials. Children can use these in a variety of ways that have no fixed purpose and can therefore be open-ended, offering many play opportunities that is a contrasting difference to what is available indoors. (Waters-Davies, J. 2022)

Being outdoors offers rich sensory experiences stimulating all senses like sounds, smells and textures. The outdoor space allows free movement to be more active and offers challenges to take risks and try out new ideas. Claxton (1999) argued that developing young children's willingness to take risks is part of the 'toolkit' for children to become effective learners and to face challenges. (Tovey, H. 2007)

The Scottish government's Early years framework recognises the importance of play and how powerful the need is to provide opportunities and places for children to play in and how it will benefit children's health, development and well-being (Play Scotland, 2023).

Likewise, the Welsh government first commenced a duty to ensure Play opportunities for children. This was the Welsh assembly's Play policy (2002) which valued play in childhood by adopting this policy to demonstrate how important play is to children and their needs. Ensuring these needs are central and that provision meet those needs. (Welsh government, 2002)

Section 2

One of the responsibilities within the early years sector is that it should provide environments that will respond to the uniqueness of developing children. Take for example the Froebelian approach, which focuses upon children taking their own lead in their learning and play.

According to Froebel play is the highest expression of human development and its free expression is what is in a child's soul (Bradbury, A. and Swailes, R. 2022)

Froebel believed practitioners should know how to support a child's self-initiated play by offering the freedom with guidance, through using observations and utilising these within practice. It is through Froebel's insights into how one thinks of children's play that places the child's self-directed play at the centre of the curriculum (Early education, 2021).

Consequently, by embedding play as a central element to learning and education it is reflecting how it is seen as a well-established belief in educative potential (Howard and McInnes et al, 2013).

Isaacs, (1933) described how play is crucial in children's development and urged anyone involved with young children to recognise and value all the different types of understandings that children develop through play (C, Macintyre. 2001). With this recognition whilst facilitating children's play the adults responsibility should only be to give those play opportunities within the surroundings that otherwise are not provided by the natural environment. This space for play should benefit the children and prevent restrictions for them to be able to explore easily (Play Wales, 2023).

It is considered difficult to define play, as traditionally these are based on an adult's perceptions. But would be much more beneficial from a child's perception for a more valuable interpretation. When looked at from a child's view previous studies have shown how children will use a variety of cues to separate activities seen as play and those that are not, including adult presence. Utilising these cues provides a good basis to show evidence to define the relationship between play, learning and an adult being present. To maximise

playful learning the adult being present should not inhibit play in any way, but only with effective pedagogy take on a variety of roles to enhance learning. These should include adult-led and child-led activities with use of open-ended questions and shared problem solving (Howard and McInnes et al, 2013).

The role of the adult should be to provide enabling environments and play opportunities to enhance positive learning and development in children's own play, following the Principles of Playwork (Play Wales, 2023) Exploring and following the play cycle provides practitioners with an insight into maintaining child-led approaches guiding and facilitating the child's impulse to play. Adults should understand their role within these principles as enablers, who give choice and spaces for children and should not 'take over' or 'direct' play in any way. However well intended, these interruptions to play can hinder rather than enhance causing a premature end to the play cycle (Waters-Davies, J, 2022).

Bottrill points out how a child-led approach is always exciting and free; it is ever changing and wild. Whereas adult –approaches tend to be planned and themed. There must be ways for the two to come together equally that will meet the child's rights and needs to freely explore. (Bottrill, G, 2018)

Take for example the views of Montessori who stressed the importance of children having access to a variety of tools and resources in spaces with furniture that suited and satisfied their interests. Thus, allowing free play to flourish by using these materials how they want. The use of these materials should be what the practitioner already knows about the children and what they need to support their learning. Is the right pedagogical approach being implemented? Are the interests of the uniqueness of each child addressed through an enabling environment? Notably, all these views underpin the idea of the child being central by respecting and supporting children as active learners, providing no limits and encouraging freedom to play (Bradbury, A. and Swailes, R, 2022).

These values are acknowledged by the Reggio Emilia approach, developed over many years where the child and adult work together in partnership that gives children their own voice and opportunities to make choices. All spaces have a purpose that allow for these moments to occur naturally. Many Early years settings have been inspired by this approach and how it can support self-directed play which provides the same key principles within the curriculum they work to (Brunton, P. and Thornton, L, 2007).

Section 3

The Schedule of growing skills (SoGS) is a developmental screening tool based on Dr Mary Sheridan's book (From Birth to Five years, 1985) which provides the developmental sequences Sheridan designed through several years of research including a national standardisation of children aged between 0-5 years (Bellman, Lingham and Aukett, 2008).

Primarily, Sheridan's research was describing developmental norms with testing mechanisms to aid in the diagnosis of a developmental delay or disorders found in children, and whilst doing so it recognised the importance of providing effective intervention for those children detected as showing delay or (ALN) additional learning needs (Sheridan, M.D. 2008).

Schedule of growing skills (SoGS) provides a reliable snapshot and rapid measure of a child's developmental strength or potential areas of delay. It assesses nine key areas via use of focused play and activities that encourage children to engage in whilst a practitioner observes them. This tool of assessment ensures consistency for all children and where they fail to meet the criteria can be referred for a more detailed assessment. The child's profile form shows the outcomes clearly giving good basis for further conversations and consultation with parents and other professionals (GL assessment, 2023).

When this method of assessment first became of use, health professionals felt there was high need for development assessments in the community that would be easy to use and explain to parents. Although a SoGS is not an in-depth assessment it shows a good indicator of where a child's delay may lie and has proved to be an extremely practical tool for healthcare professionals using minimal equipment. It can be flexible for professional judgement and enables all involved with caring for the child to explain any developmental delay in simple terms. (The schedule of growing skills in general practice, Lingham, S. No date).

As part of the Healthy child Wales programme (HCWP) a health visitor will conduct regular development checks at home visits. But sometimes a parent will report concerns with their child's development, and this is when a SoGs can benefit and be administered to highlight any potential delay in a quick and easy way. Early detection shows substantial benefits to the child with early intervention rather than later in childhood (Margiad E. et al, 2013).

On occasions carrying out the assessment will uncover delays parents had been unaware of indicating that this type of tool works well and does what it is supposed to do. (Bellman, Lingham and Aukett, 2008)

However, one must admit that previous studies have shown that when children engage in a task that are in playful conditions with an adult nearby, sat on the floor with free choice they perform better compared to a more formal situation sat at a table with an adult and no choice. This suggests that when children manipulate cues to define and create playful conditions themselves it has an impact on their learning performance and general behaviour, enhanced further when an adult is nearby rather than present (McInnes, K. et.al 2011).

Furthermore, another study carried out by foundation phase teachers with ‘underachieving’ children used their own play-based approach in an outdoor area, including child-initiated activities. This showed how these children began to flourish when engaged in child-initiated learning in the natural environment. Through this study teachers were able to notice how certain places, people and the activity appeared to positively affect the children become more confident learners. This study also focussed on enabling teachers to critically reflect using own professional judgements and what is expected exploring their own perceptions of ‘underachievement’ (Maynard, T, Waters, J. and Clement, J. 2013).

As explained in the Early year's foundation stage framework, assessments play an important role in helping parents and practitioners to recognise progress or delay in children and how to meet those needs with planning and support whilst drawing on their own knowledge of the child. (EYFS, 2021)

With this purpose in mind, it is important to keep the ‘whole child’ as central when carrying out any assessments. Remembering all children learn and develop at their own rates and in their own time. Observations should consider all family background and events that could contribute to a child’s development delay at that given time (Birth to 5 matters, no date).

Using a combination of this type of method with well-trained, experienced practitioners who can understand the child, will contribute to making their own professional judgements on the outcome (Bellman, Lingham and Aukett, 2008).

Indeed, the more knowledge of child development and of the child gathering a ‘whole picture’ can influence and interpret the practitioner's result and the intervention needed next (Maynard, T, Waters, J. and Clement, J. 2013).

Section 4

The curriculum for non-maintained settings explains how observation is key to the role of Early years practitioners. It helps with findings of children's interests, fascinations and what engages them. With thorough knowledge of child development effective observations can aid in responding to help children progress. These observations should be through a variety of contexts incorporating the indoors and outdoors which will support how children are seen in different situations. (Welsh government, 2022).

The importance of observations in this way tunes in and helps with understanding of the child's development and with close partnership working with parents informs the practitioner how the next steps that are appropriate can enhance learning for the individual child. How the child then responds will evaluate if it's appropriate to the child or not (Bruce, T, 2011).

Every child has their own unique pathway of learning and how they develop is woven in a holistic pattern. Responsive use of pedagogy is needed in recognising what children can do and what they understand (Birth to 5 matters, no date).

Play is a vitally important component for how children develop. As previously discussed, children need to have their own voice heard and from the child's view. When play is self-chosen it 'lights them up'. Children need opportunities to engage with each other, to grow skills that allow them to negotiate and communicate together. Standing back and watching will allow children's voices to be heard. It is better for practitioners to observe by stopping, listening and looking getting to know children's behaviours better (Bottrill, G, 2018).

For the adults observations it should understand the importance of play and learning and how adults' presence can enhance or inhibit these. Use of the space and play opportunities that are provided for children allow them to initiate their learning and will create environments for maximizing development in a playful manner (Howard, J. and McInnes, K. 2013).

Whilst observing children in what they like to do during play can provide adults with the information about the child and gauge what they need. Observations that take place at regular times showing how they are during daily routines can capture whether activities, toys or other equipment are suitable or if changes are needed (Early years matter, 2023).

Free play offers the observer many insights into the child's development and where they are as it is a child's-initiated activity that enhances holistic development in a range of ways whilst exploring with natural and spontaneous play. One example is use of loose parts that can provide endless possibilities in play and encourage open ended play, promoting a wide variety of behaviours in play. Where the play environment has flexibility the level of creativity is greater and largely expressed. Piaget describes how play is linked with cognitive

and intellectual development. How children learn is emphasised by Peter Gray's theory and that children are designed to explore through their own self-directed play and should have the environments to safely experiment and interact with ease that they can acquire the skills and ideas to take into adulthood (Play and playground encyclopaedia, 2023).

To support children's development through observation can be to take the look and listen approach and by taking notes over a period of a time. This provides useful guidance to help with where children are in their learning and how they are developing. Making use of the assessment can be regularly reviewed to plan for next steps in the progress being made (Rodger, R, 2012).

For the adult making these observations they must be transferrable and easy to understand for the next person. Use of different assessments emphasise how children gradually learn over time where information about the child can be gathered. Photographs, notes taken on the spot are invaluable pieces for future planning for children (Bruce, T, 2011).

When an adult can get to know the unique child during observations, they consider them holistically. This can be compared to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory where all influences on the child are brought together for them to be fully understood. When this theory is related into practice it highlights how the child's immediate surroundings can affect their development. When acknowledged by the adult they can help support the child enhancing overall learning. (Bradbury, A. and Swailes, R.,2022)

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