

Play and theory.

The importance of play types

In an early years practice we facilitate many types of play, this allows children opportunities and experiences that can help to contribute to their behaviour and their physical, emotional, and mental developments (Play Wales, 2017). When children play it should be an enjoyable experience. Holistic play focuses on teaching children effectively about the world around them, it places well-being as the top priority (Walbank, 2021). Elkind (2008) describes play as an essential and crucial part of a child's life, it should never be seen as a luxury. A vital part of children's development is physical play, it is important we create opportunities for children to work big body movements, rough and tumble play can enable a more dynamic and effective practice (Huber, 2016). Rough and tumble play is also known as risky play, this type of play is adventurous, unstructured, free, and thinking outside the box (Choi, ND). Hughes (2006) describes rough and tumble as a close encounter play and its main focus is touch and gauging strength. This play enables physical contact that uses up a vast amount of energy but should not result in children being hurt. According to Choi (ND) this type of play can benefit and support a child's development in ways such as, becoming resilient, finding independence, physical coordination, enabling leadership and gaining confidence. When a child is provided with opportunities to develop these skills, they are more likely to attempt a task again even after failing the first time. Choi (ND) highlights that many parents can find themselves overprotective of rough play and encourage a more supervised approach to play, however Coleman (2017) argues that we should not fear risky play as another benefit includes bonding and when engaged in this type of play the oxytocin hormone is released and can boost a feeling of closeness and contribute to creating emotional bonds. Bowlby (2005) backs this up by describing rough play as 'heightened bonding' that should be implemented more in schools and at home. According to Nursery world (2019) sometimes in settings rough play can be feared but should not be and to support this play practitioners must monitor the situation and ensure this play is always accompanied by positive feelings, fun, monitoring children's interaction, gauging facial expressions and the positive noises children may make during this risky play.

According to Hanrahan (2019) rough play links with holistic development as it is unstructured and lacks boundaries, therefore children are assessing their own risks, discovering what is safe and testing their competence. The desired outcome during rough and tumble is for children to become adults with risk assessment skills whilst being considerate of others well-being yet continuing to celebrate their own endeavours (Hanrahan, 2019).

According to Smith (2009) another type of play we should encourage is object play, this type of play should be promoted for all ages. Object play starts with babies grasping items, followed by a toddler who will build up blocks and up to older children playing in a construction area, or shop role play. Object play is not always exclusive to toys, we can link this to holistic development as children are able to explore and expand their object play to many other areas of play, including water play, nature, pots and pans and anything they come across and use in a positive and effective way (Children's Museum of Atlanta, 2019). Vygotsky believed that the benefits of using objects in play contribute to self-regulation and abstract thinking (Smolucha, 2021). Other skills and benefits can include, cognitive development, learning about the world around them through objects, fine motor skills, gross motor skills and social development skills (Developing minds, 2023). Practitioners are able to support object play by ensuring children are presented with an environment that encourages them to explore, manipulate and touch objects. This could lead to endless opportunities to further learning and imagination. An area does not need to be over stimulating, a simple approach can sometimes lead to the most successful open-minded types of play (Galileo, 2019). According to Johnson (2021) during the early stages of object play children manipulate objects and explore, it tends to focus on the importance of physical development as children work their large and small muscle skills. Johnson (2021) believes that through object play children are able to learn about how the world works, what it is made up of and concepts such as gravity and turn taking. This type of play also branches out to areas such as sensory integration, colours, textures, imagination, and object permanence (Johnson, 2021). Piaget backs this up with his theory, suggesting that children learn through motor abilities and their senses, he further explains the importance of object permanence, arguing that it is the most important accomplishment of a child, as without this knowledge objects would have no permanent or separate existence (Piaget, 1999).

Why it is important for children to choose their own play.

Child led play is critical to a child's holistic development and their well-being.

Practitioners must never restrict play or break times as a punishment. Children of all abilities should have access to a high-quality opportunity of play (Division of educational and child psychology, 2019) As stated in the UNCRC (ND) Article thirty-one, all children have the right to play and the right to rest when needed. According to Waterford (2021) play is recognised by the UNCRC as an important right because it contributes to so many developments, such as, cognitive, social, physical and the emotional well-being of a child. Our aim as practitioners is to get the most out of every play experience. McInnes (2013) highlights that children are less likely to explore and approach activities in the presence of an adult. Adult interaction can have an impact on a child's use of activities and how they may approach it. McInnes (2011) states that the attitude and playfulness during activities is that part which is beneficial to the child's learning and not the act of play itself. In order to guide play of this nature as practitioners we must view and define play from a child's perspective (McInnes, 2011). McInnes (2013) also suggests that as practitioners we are able to support activities through open ended questions and developing a mutual understanding with children that will then enable the child choice and control. This approach maximises play and learning whilst continuing to allow children the opportunities to guide their own play (McInnes, 2013). It is important for children to have their own ideas and for them to take control as this enables them to explore and learn through first hand experiences (Kimberly, 2016). In order to provide a successful child led practice, practitioners should offer a safe and stimulating environment which allows children to follow the child their play urges. Practitioners should support child led play without interrupting, the main focus is to observe, and wait to see what children may find out, explore, and discover by themselves (Caro, 2012). Spielgaben (ND) states that Froebel believed all children are unique and develop at their own pace therefore children learn best in environments where they are able to explore things from their own perspectives and practitioners should serve as a guide. However, some people believe that children who are developmentally

ready to read and write should have the opportunity to do so, which isn't something that is usually available through child led play (Spielgaben, ND). Montessori backs up Froebel's approach as her goal was to develop a child as a whole through self-directed play. Montessori believes that a practitioner's role is to open a child's full potential and not mould them or put them into boxes of expectations. According to Nursery resources (2018) careful observation is key to successful in the moment planning which contributes to enabling child led play. Ephgrave (2018) believes that the aim of spontaneous planning is to capture what interests' children in a moment. However, Nursery resources (2018) highlights that some practitioners find this type of planning challenging when they have no structured planning or focused activities. Ephgrave (2018) writes about how practitioners can implement this planning in ways that will offer support in a child led environment, this can include, a safe and stimulating environment, observations, and close listening, identifying the individual needs and interests of a child, and asking open ended questions. Practitioners should provide an environment filled with praise and positive learning experiences, where children can speak and explore confidently (Ephgrave, 2018). Ephgrave (2020) discusses the main outcomes to planning in the moment. Practitioners must remember to plan, respond, and adapt. Integrating spontaneous planning allows each child to be treated as a unique individual enabling a good level of development (Ephgrave, 2020). DECP (2019) believes the most important aspects of a child's life is play and they value all areas that enable them to do this. In order to promote resilience, flexibility and development which can contribute to social relationships, adults should avoid being intrusive and providing too much structure. Children who do not have their basic needs met can struggle to with play and practices should provide children with the space, time, and permission to play regardless of their background or abilities so that children will always have a safe space in which they can be free and access their rights to play (DECP, 2019).

An understanding of observation methods

Observation is an essential tool that practitioners can use in setting to understand the developmental needs and interests of a child (Machan, 2016). The foundation Phase profile is an assessment that is key to the Welsh governments early years development assessment framework, also known as EYDAF (Welsh government, ND). The aims of the foundation phase profile is to support a child's learning

throughout their time in the foundation phase and provide a consistent baseline assessment nationally. This tool is used to enable adults to track a child's progression and the milestones they reach but also to identify where a child may need extra support (Smith, 2022). The benefits of the foundation phase profile are that it supports effective transition and the information gathered can aid practitioners to communicate effectively with parents or carers and enable practitioners to provide specific information based on their child and a clear view on how they can be supported (Welsh government, ND). According to Thomas (2016) the profile is designed to link with the assessments the health professionals use to enable early identification of potential Special educational needs, additional learning needs and developmental delays. When observing and completing assessments the profile allows professionals to provide a developmentally appropriate holistic curriculum (Thomas, 2016). This assessment links to holistic development as it allows children to build from their previous knowledge and learning experiences, it reaches out to a wide range of developments which can be delivered inside or outside (Nursery day association, 2022). The areas of development that the profile covers are, physical development, mathematical development, literacy and communication, personal and social development and well-being and cultural diversity (Welsh government, ND). There are two sizes to the profile a 'full profile' and the 'compact profile'. The compact version is a smaller baseline assessment that includes four ladder skills. The full profile includes skill tracking throughout the foundation phase and contains more skill ladders. Both of the methods produce score outcomes and a child's progression can be measured with ease (Evans, 2018). However, Tassoni (2014) states that the foundation phase profile sets developmental expectations without age adjusted methods, meaning children who are born in the summer months are at a disadvantage to meeting the expectations that the profile sets. The younger children in the class would be marked on the scale as 'less able' than the older children in the year group and predicted to have lower achievements by the end of key stage one. Stated in the Welsh government (ND) guidance, all assessments are carried out in the language of the school or setting, creating a barrier for children of other languages who could be reaching developmental milestones and only struggling with a language barrier (McConville, 2019). According to Ward (2017) when using the profile in setting practitioners should make an observation of the children covering a range of activities. Children are then assessed against a total of seventeen learning

goals. Ward (2017) explains that practitioners firstly observe a child doing an activity and later make the decision as to whether the child is above or below the goals set in the profile. Hutchin (2003) gives some examples of goals practitioners could use in setting, this could be communication activities, can a child sit and listen to a story? Can a child follow instructions? And are they able to speak and express themselves. Hutchin (2003) also speaks about how the profile can cover physical aspects of development and a child could be observed trying to control and co-ordinate objects. (Ward, 2017) The foundation phase profile covers other areas such as mathematical activities such as, recognising shapes and numbers and also problem solving. Ward (2017) explains that children are not tested using this observation method or whether they can or cannot reach these goals, but simply observed by a keyworker whilst they get involved in everyday activities. Practitioners must then use their knowledge to assess whether a child has met the appropriate goals (Ward, 2017). The majority of activities that are needed to be assessed can be child led activities, allowing children to explore the classroom in a holistic way, however some adult led activities are able to give practitioners a better insight to these goals and outcomes (Ward, 2017).

Understanding the role of play when observing.

Azilo (2019) describes play as a crucial part of measuring a child's development, observing during play allows adults to monitor a child's physical actions, facial expressions, behaviours, and how they communicate with others. It is important to observe through play as a child will reveal more of themselves as individuals through these experiences. It also shows practitioners how a child is able to interact with other children and adults (Azilo, 2019). McInnes (2013) believes play is essential for learning and development and also a more valuable approach to play is one that focuses on the perspective of a child. This will allow an insight to the quality of play provided, allowing changes to be made to aid the learning and development of children (McInnes, 2013). When we observe child led play it is able to give a true reflection of a child, adults can sometimes rush a child through something they are not entirely ready for, not allowing a true reflection of a task and whether they have reached that development (Billman, 2002). Children will attempt what they are ready for in their own time and adults need to take a step back and see what emerges through observations (Kindergarden, 2017). According to McInnes (2013) children

who practice problem-solving activities in a play environment have a significantly improved performance than when an activity is done under supervision.

Vygotsky (1978) highlighted that as children mature there are levels of development that will happen automatically, Jean Piaget also recognised this method. However, Vygotsky also believed that children learn from 'Knowledgeable others' and must engage in social interactions of this nature, therefore group observations should be considered (Vinney, 2019). According to Learning journals (ND) watching children interact can be an effective way to observe their social skills, communication and language development. When completing group observations, the Leuven scale is a method that could be used to support children, this records a child's well-being, involvement and how engaged a child may be in a particular task (Learning journal, ND). Moyles (2015) used the spiral theory, the process starts with children playing freely, allowing them to explore new ideas and ways to play, adults observe during this play time and watch for cues for when a child is indicating they are ready for some structure. In this moments adults can guide children and demonstrate how to use resources or objects and then take a step back again to allow more exploration and free play (Moyles, 2015). Observing a child's growth and development can be interesting and practitioners should enjoy the experience as much as the child. Observation allows us to watch how children grow and begin to understand the world around them (Strader, W, H, 2023). Observing children in play is important as it recognises play as a valuable and effective way to learn and develop in the early years. The experiences a child has during these years contributes to their outlook on the world (UK Essays, 2018).

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