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Children's Play: Theory and Practice

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Section 1

Play is an activity that young children naturally engage in every day, but it is so much more than them just having fun, as it is at the very centre of young children's learning and development. According to the Welsh Government (2014) play is an open-ended experience that is both essential and a natural part of childhood that is freely chosen and internally motivated, which means that it contributes significantly to children's individual learning and growth, without pressure and without necessarily having a goal or reward. Through play children are able to express their creativity, use their imagination and think in a wider variety of ways. Play allows children to practice their problem-solving skills, develop their language skills and build positive social connections with both peers and adults.

McMahon and Dyer (2018a) believe that play benefits children by encouraging them to explore new ideas, understand symbols and learn how others think and behave, all of which have a key role in their growth, learning and development. Play is a fundamental aspect of childhood and has a significant impact on a child's physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. Various types of play engage children in different ways, encouraging them to develop holistically and gain a range of skills that prepare them for their future. By understanding the importance of different play types, practitioners and caregivers can better support children's overall growth and development, allowing them to provide a variety of opportunities for more purposeful play.

This essay will explore and analyse two different types of play and the importance of each one. The first one that will be discussed is exploratory play which is also known as sensory play. This type of play is where children learn and process information through the use of their senses, including sight, smell, taste and touch. From birth children use their senses to explore and make sense of the world around them, allowing them to build a deeper understanding of their environment. Sensory experiences can help children to strengthen and improve their senses, which supports their ability to process and respond to different experiences. Sensory play is also useful in helping children develop their language and social skills as well as problem solving skills, as they learn how to interact with different textures, objects and materials. Children can use their senses to explore and discover the functions of

different things in their environment, leading to hands on learning experiences that encourage them to be interested and confident in exploring new things. One of the benefits to this play is that adults can provide opportunities for this play easily by using resources that are commonly found and readily available. This in essence makes sensory play accessible to all children regardless of who they are or where they come from. According to Sharman, Cross and Vennis (2015a) exploratory play can include a range of materials or items such as sand, rice or water, which can provide them with very hand on sensory experiences. As the child interacts with different sensory items and materials, they learn to experiment with new objects, problem solve and understand the properties of different things. According to Howard (2020) play is essential for development in early childhood but can often be limited due to a lack of time space and engagement especially in outdoor environments where children could have more freedom to explore limiting the opportunities for this type of play.

The next type of play that will be discussed in this essay is imaginative and socio-dramatic play. According to Waters-Davies (2022a) imaginative play and socio-dramatic play gives children the opportunity to explore real and make-believe experiences. Children are able to act out different roles and make sense of the world around them through this type of play. This may go towards helping them understand and process real life situations. Children are also able to express their feelings and emotions through this type of play. According to Loizou (2017) this type of play is a mature form of play and that adult interaction should be limited for this type of play as it allows children to be independent in making their own choices on what is happening in their play. Vygotsky (1978, cited in Keenan, Evans and Crowley, 2016) believed that imaginative play is an essential aspect of a child's development because it helps them to understand social rules, encourages them to act beyond their current stage of development, and engage in imaginative activities that help them to understand the world around them, They go on to say this type of play may prepare them for more structured environments in later years, where they will need to follow various social norms. Thomas-Walters (2023) agrees with this and suggests this type of play allows children to feel deep levels of emotions and that it prepares them for adult life.

Mildred Parten's theory of play (1932, cited in Waters-Davies, 2022b) suggested that there are six stages of play being unoccupied play, independent play, onlooker play, parallel play, associative play and cooperative play. These stages of play show how children's play progresses as they grow and develop, moving from activities where they will play by themselves to more interactive and social play experiences with others. It is important that practitioners understand the stages of play as it could help them identify the appropriate support needed for the child depending on their stage of development.

Section 2

Bianquin, Ray-Kaeser and Encarnação (2018) explain that defining play is not easy as different research has different definitions making it difficult for practitioners to understand play. Child directed play, sometimes referred to as free play, happens when children take the lead in their own activities, making their own choices about what they want to do and deciding how, where, and when to play, allowing them to be in control of their own learning and experiences. Some of the benefits of self-directed play could be enabling children to gain confidence and also to build independence. According to Fiechtner and Albrecht (2019) child directed play is essential and widely contributes to the development of the whole child, developing their physical, cognitive, social and emotional skills.

According to McLean, *et al.* (2022) what the adult defines as play is key to providing opportunities for self-directed play, they also emphasise the importance that each adult should have a significant amount of knowledge to promote this play. Adults can encourage self-directed play by providing the children with time, space and open-ended resources that allow them to explore their environment freely, without too many restrictions. Creating a safe and nurturing environment is key to helping children feel comfortable exploring independently and making them feel secure enough to take healthy risks. According to Waters-Davies (2022c) the adult plays a key role in supporting children's play, by observing their interests and creating opportunities, whilst ensuring the play remains child led and that it does not turn into adult directed play, allowing children to be in control of their own learning and experiences. For this reason, adults should carefully consider their levels of involvement in children's play. It is important that adults remember to take a step

back and trust children to direct their own play. Children are experts in their own play and do not need to be constantly guided by an adult. Adults should only involve themselves if they are invited to join in with the play by the child. King and Sturrock (2019) emphasize the importance of the adults key role in the play cycle, which can range from simple observation (play maintenance) and providing the children with resources (simple intervention), to higher levels of intervention such as medial intervention, when the child has invited the adult to join in their play and complex intervention, where both the adult and child participate in play cues and returns, however they also state that adults can take over play leading to what is known as adulteration or they can interrupt and end the play leading to what is known as annihilation, both of which can negatively impact the child's experience by abruptly ending their play.

According to McInnes, *et al.* (2013) self-directed play is important for a child's development but when their play turns into adult led play it is no longer play from the child's perspective and becomes a task. Therefore, in these circumstances children may not be reaching their full potential and ability to develop. When children have the opportunity to lead their own play, they learn how to problem solve, communicate their feelings and emotions and learn social skills such as sharing with others and taking turns. These skills have a significant impact on their ability to build positive relationships with peers and adults. Howard and McInnes (2012) also found that self-directed play has been shown to be linked with higher levels of emotional well-being and play that is no longer seen as play by a child could be linked to lower levels of emotional well-being, making self-directed play an important part of their childhood. Colliver *et al.* (2022) agrees and found that children that had opportunities to self-directed play were able to self-regulate their emotions better. Self-directed play can also help children to build resilience and independence which in turn promotes confidence, encouraging children to take healthy risks and develop practical life skills. The benefits of self-directed play continue after their childhood as well, as it shapes children into confident and independent individuals. The skills they build throughout their childhood will carry through to their adult life and self-directed play significantly contributes to these skills.

Section 3

Observations involve closely watching and listening to children in different environments to understand their interests, strengths and needs. According to Sharman, Cross and Vennis (2015b) observing children helps practitioners identify where they are at in their development and whether they are following regular patterns, and it also helps practitioners to plan future activities that will further support that child's development. By practitioners regularly observing children in their everyday activities they can gain a deeper understanding and insight into their behaviours and identify what areas they may be able to support a child. This could improve a child's experience as practitioners could provide support using a more personalised approach. Welsh Government (2024) also suggest that observations help practitioners to understand each child and how they can plan to further support the child. Observations provide practitioners with immediate real time information and allow them to reflect on what they have found, enabling them to analyse the information, draw meaningful conclusions and build on their knowledge. This process will help them to implement effective planning for the child's future experiences and learning, ensuring that they can meet the child's individual needs. According to Bruce, Louis, McCall (2015a) for observations to be effective they follow a process of observe, support and extend, meaning that practitioners must firstly carefully watch and listen, then provide appropriate support and lastly provide opportunities for the child to extend their play and learning. It is important that observations are accurate and should only be based on what is seen and heard, avoiding assumptions or bias that could lead to incorrect results. Nicol and Taplin (2017a) emphasise the importance that practitioners should be careful with the language they use when doing observations and should avoid being negative or overly positive and try to be as objective as they can ensuring a true reflection of the child.

According to Connect Childcare (2024) using photos and videos for observations is a useful way to record and document learning moments that practitioners may struggle to explain in words, and practitioners can also share progress with parents in a meaningful way, helping them stay informed and involved in their child's progress. This could strengthen the relationship between parents and practitioners. Recording observations using videos or photos allows for easy sharing between practitioners and parents, regular documentation over a long period of time as it is less time consuming and is personalised to each individual child (Bruce, Louis and McCall,

2015b). University of Plymouth (2024) also agrees that observing children through photos or videos can be beneficial as these methods are quick, they capture the real in time moments and can collect a large amount of information, however this type of observation method does have its challenges and can be open to interpretation, meaning that the same footage could be seen differently by someone else observing. Additionally, there are ethical and privacy concerns, as this method could be intrusive, and not all children may have consent to have photos and videos taken. This limitation could mean that some children may not be able to be included in these types of observations, making it necessary for practitioners to have alternative observation methods. Lambert (2019a) goes on to say that video observations allow practitioners to analyse their findings in more detail but does take into consideration that although quick in the moment can be time consuming later on and that where the camera is placed is critical so that practitioners can collect a fair amount of data but also so that it is not invading the child's space as they may change their behaviour. Photo and video observations could give a holistic view of the child as they show the visual emotions and interactions of a child. However, this type of observation may only be done in certain moments rather than spontaneously which could mean practitioners may miss certain aspects of their development (Lambert, 2019b). Another limitation with this type of observation is that they do not necessarily show what the child is thinking, and this could be left open for interpretation.

Section 4

Nicol and Taplin (2017b) suggest that observing children during play allows practitioners to build a more accurate picture as it shows where the child is at in their development whilst they are engaged in something they enjoy. Play is important when observing children as it is a more natural activity and provides adults with a wider picture of the child's development rather than observing children from structured tests and assessments. As Besio, *et al.* (2018) suggests when observing children whilst they are playing this is more of a natural and effective way to gather information in real time. This helps practitioners as it provides them with clearer and more accurate information on their abilities, interests and development. Smidt (2015a) agrees with this and highlights that observing young children closely helps practitioners gain a better understanding of their progress and allows them to find ways in which they can adapt activities to better suit each child's individual needs

and provide the appropriate support they need to develop. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the importance of play and the importance for adults to understand that play is a natural need for them, allowing adults to observe children in a natural way as they develop. Observing children during play helps practitioners to provide better support for children as they are able to understand and follow their interests and abilities, allowing them to take a more personalized learning approach (Department for Education, 2024).

However, Smidt (2015b) also criticizes the way that observations are often too overly focused on targets, making them more about a tick box exercise rather than really understanding the child and their development. They go on to highlight that every child develops differently and at their own pace based on their experiences and environment, therefore setting these fixed targets or milestones for what they should be able to do by a certain age can often be unrealistic and are not always accurate to each child's individual development. Similarly, Taylor (2019) highlights the importance of observing children without judging them because every child grows and develops in their own unique way, and these differences are a normal part of childhood and should be embraced and seen as a positive. Recognising these differences in development allows for more effective child centred observations that focus more on what the child can do rather than what they cannot do. The method of completing observations needs to be changed throughout as the child develops and grows. McMahon and Dyer (2018b) point out that observation and planning in Years 1 and 2 is not the same as EYFS, as Key Stage 1 education mainly measures the development of literacy and maths through SATs, which could make it difficult to observe other important areas of learning. Whilst EYFS observations focus on play based observations and view the development of the child holistically. Changes in observation and planning methods may not give a clear or accurate understanding of the child's development. Another reason observations may be inaccurate could be because children may act or behave differently because they are aware that they are being observed, also known as the 'Hawthorne Effect' (Franz, 2018). Therefore, it is important that any observations that are completed are done so as discretely as possible to ensure that the results are accurate (Sharman, Cross and Vennis, 2015c). Observing children during play could provide a bigger picture of the whole child and shows different aspects of the child's development compared to written

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tests and assessments. However, observing children during play does come with its challenges as it can be open to interpretation, children could act differently, or practitioners may go into observations with a preconceived idea of what they wish the results to be. Else (2014) also states that observations are a useful way of collecting large amounts of data but only show the person who is observing perspective. To ensure observations are accurate, they should use a range of different techniques and be carried out regularly.

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