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The importance of play

Children interact with the world thorough play. Play is fun, challenging and gives children a sense of freedom. Children learn about the world around them through play (Play Scotland, 2023). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the importance of play worldwide through Article 31 of the convention which states that a child has the right to play (UNICEF, 1990). There are many different types of play and the Welsh curriculum for school's support this by having six areas of learning, these are expressive arts, health and well-being, humanities, language, literacy and communication, mathematics and numeracy and science and technology (Welsh Government, 2022). This is important because they come together to help support a child's holistic development. The different play types also support the child's holistic development in accordance to Maslow's Hierarchy of needs (Mundy, 2017).

Creative play is when a child experiments or creates something using a range of tools or materials. Creative play is allowing children to be curious, solve problems and explore their environment (Play Wales, 2017). Children do not need expensive materials to participate in creative play, loose parts and scrap can offer a lot of opportunities to be creative (Play Wales, 2017). There are a lot of ways children can partake in creative play, some examples could be, painting, dancing, and modelling. Padayichie, K. (2023) states that creative play is important in supporting children's holistic development because it helps to develop their language skills by talking about what they are doing they learn new words. Creative play gives children the freedom to express themselves without judgement, and this is important because it helps the child build confidence. Children can also develop their critical thinking skills through creative play because they are using their own ideas, visualising and finding new ways to do things (Birth to five matters, pg54, 2021). This is important because it helps the children to develop their communication and problem-solving skills. Role play is a form of creative play and by role playing children are developing their mathematical skill by counting pennies in the shop. Practitioners can support creative play by making sure there are resources available for the children to use and that everything they need it accessible (School, 2022).

Deep play is allowing children to partake in play that is risky such as, climbing trees, jumping off walls and even confrontation to bullies. Deep play is important in supporting children's holistic development because it helps the child to conquer fears and develop survival skills (Play Scotland, 2023). The level of risk in deep play will vary from child to child as each child is different and may find different things scary or nerve-wracking. Taking risks in front of friends can be important to some children to maintain social relationships (Play Wales, 2017). When children engage in deep play they are developing physically and using their gross motor skills for things such as climbing and jumping. This is important because by developing their motor skills it helps children to develop their co-ordination, strength and balance which enables them to perform daily tasks such as holding a knife and fork, walking and picking objects up (Clare Devlin, 2023). Practitioners can support deep play by observing the children quietly and only intervening, when necessary, for example the play is becoming too risky and a child may get hurt (Birth to five matters, 2007).

Parten's theory is that there are different stages of play. These include Unoccupied play which is when the child does not play but observes their surroundings and moves parts of their body such as kicking their legs (Parten, 1932, pg 249). Gregory (2023a) states that this is important because it allows children to learn about their bodies. As newborn babies move their hand, feet, arms and legs they begin to identify those body parts which encourages them to learn to reach for objects. Solitary play is when a child plays alone and makes no effort to talk to other children, they are only interested in what they are doing (Parten, 1932, pg 250). This is important because it encourages independence as by playing with a toy independently, they are learning that they are able to do things by themselves (Gregory, 2022a). Onlooker play is when the child watches other children play, but does not enter into the play, they may however talk to the children playing or ask questions about the play (Parten, 1932, pg 249). This is important as it boosts a child's cognitive skills by observing the children play, they are improving their memory, perception and attention (Gregory, 2023b). Parallel play is when children play independently but side by side to another child. This is important as it supports their fine and gross motor skills by playing with toys (Gregory, 2023c). Associative play is when children play together with the same toys but have no common goal (Parten, 1932, pg 250). This is important because children begin to develop social

skills from communicating with other children (Gregory, 2022b). Finally Cooperative play is when children work together and organize activities and share the roles of the play (Parten, 1932, pg 251). This is important because children learn academic skills such as, science and mathematics as well as enhancing their social skills (Gregory, 2023d).

Self-directed play

Self-directed play is chosen freely by the child. The child is able to control what they would like to play and how they would like to play. Self-directed play allows children to follow what interests them, be creative and make up play ideas and to follow their instincts (Play Adventures, 2019). Recourses for self-directed play should have endless possibilities for example, a stick could be a magic wand, a sword or a bridge. When children get onboard with self-directed play it is important not to adulterate and remember that the children decide how they play. Self-directed play differs from structured play because structured play has an end goal and is led by the adult (Playground Centre, 2016). Self-directed play is important because it lets children practice independence from a young age. It also motivates their imagination, by giving children opportunities for self-directed play, practitioners are allowing them to unleash their creative side (Ledendecker, 2020).

In order for adults to support children in self-directed play they must give children the time to explore their environments and discover opportunities for self-directed play. This is important because children learn by doing and experimenting with their ideas, by questioning, thinking and forming hypotheses this develops their intellectual skills and also supports the child's holistic development by allowing children to discover limitless opportunities (Bright Horizons, 2020). Practitioners can support self-directed play by not filling up the day with activities and leaving time for children to find their own play. The Reggio Emilia emphasizes a child-centred approach and supports children to explore their interests and values their natural inquisitiveness and ability to learn through experiences (Berg, 2024). King and Sturrock (2020) state that the role of the adult is to have minimal involvement and to observe. A Paper by Sturrock and Else (1998) states that this is play maintenance, where the play is self-contained so there is no need for the practitioner to intervene, they merely observe the activity.

It is important that the practitioner observes the children as it helps the practitioner to see what the children are interested in therefore, they can create activities around the interests of the children, making it a more education play experience (play like mum, 2023). Sturrock and Else, (1998, Cited King and Sturrock, 2020, p.35) describes adults being able to support self-directed play by acting as a resource for play, this could be as simple as getting the child a different colour pencil to colour with. The adult would deliver the pencil then vacate the area This is important because it 'encourages the child's confidence and ownership of their own learning environment' (Estyn, 2024). Adults have a responsibility in facilitating self-directed play by making sure the environment is safe for the children to roam and secure to ensure they cannot escape. This is important because children learn best when they are not scared which helps them to take intellectual risks and fully engage in activities. Having a safe environment encourages meaningful learning (Schoolhouse, 2024). It is believed that when children play, they follow the play cycle. Else (2000, quoted in King & Sturrock, 2019, p.2) states the play cycle outlines a manner of play which starts in the child's internal world that sends signals of play to their external world.

Self-directed play supports a child's emotional development by offering chances for children to face situations that have upset them in a fun and safe way. Through imaginative play children can explore other roles, such as police man, chef or pirate. This is able to help them learn how to navigate negative impacts and also improves their long-term emotional well-being. (ImaginationPlayground292, 2023). Self-directed play encourages children to problem solve by allowing children to make up their own rules of play, they would then need to figure out how make their game work the way they want it to (Lendendecker, 2020). This is important because when a child confronts a problem on their own it build's confidence and they develop a greater social and situational awareness. Having challenges build's resilience (Marlborough, 2020). Through self-directed play children are able to experience the joy of uncovering themselves. Being able to purse their creative ideas without fear that they will fail (Juster, 2015).

Observation

Observation is key in assessing a child's holistic development. A definition of observation is watching and listening to somebody or something for a period of time in order to learn something new by picking up what is happening (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Observation is important because it helps practitioners to better understand the children in their care. It enables them to identify their likes and their dislikes and also shows practitioners how they react to different circumstances, such as meeting new people (Rosa, 2015). Through observation practitioners are able to assess a child's progress by watching them play they can see what activities they are having difficulty with. This will enable practitioners to find out any specific learning needs a child may have (Rosa, 2015).

Narrative observations are detailed, descriptive, written accounts of what a child is doing during an activity or over a period of time (Connect Childcare, 2024). The narrative observation method is good for helping practitioners identify a child's interests and the things they are not interested in (Connect Childcare, 2024). This is important because practitioners are able to adapt the learning experience to meet the particular needs of the children as individuals (Birth to five matters, 2007). Another benefit of a narrative observation is that there is no need to plan. If a child is doing something that the practitioner must observe then they are able to quickly get a pen and paper to note down what is happening (Rosa, 2015). This is important because it can help practitioners to keep detailed logs of things the children in their care can do and cannot do. A narrative observation can help practitioners to understand how the child thinks. This is because this method of observation captures a series of events which offers a clear picture of the child's interactions, how they process learning and their behaviour (Connect Childcare, 2024). This is important because the practitioner is then able to share this information with the child's parents or any professional who could offer support. However, it is important to consider that using narrative observation usually only works well for one child at a time as it would be difficult for a practitioner to write detailed notes about more than one child at the same time (Haddad, 2017). Using the narrative observation method

is also time consuming and the practitioner may miss out on some bits of the observation as they are rushing to write their notes down (Haddad, 2017). It is also important to consider that during the narrative observation method the practitioner would usually sit away from the children taking notes, this might trigger the child to behave differently or distract the child from the activity that has been set out to observe (Haddad, 2017). This would make the observation difficult for the practitioner.

The narrative observation method is an efficient way of gathering different information from the same activity. The practitioner is able to use that information in order to bring in the different areas of the curriculum to gain a view of the child's holistic development (Drake, 2006). Having a holistic approach to observations considers every aspect of a child's development, such as their cognitive, physical, emotional and social development. This is important because practitioners are able to gain a holistic understanding of the child's development and allows them to deliver support that focuses on specific areas of development and supports the child's well-being (Connect childcare, 2023). Another benefit of holistic observations is that it allows practitioners to track a child's development and learning progress across different aspects. This is important because it helps the practitioner to identify any areas that potentially need attention or additional support (Connect childcare, 2023). A holistic approach to observations helps practitioners to ensure that no part of the child's development gets overlooked. This is important because it promotes a good approach to learning and by valuing each child's unique interests, developmental journeys and unique abilities practitioners can create positive impacts on learning for children. (Connect childcare, 2023).

The role of play and how this affects the child's engagement

Observations and assessments done through watching children play allows practitioners to learn more about the children in their care. They learn what the children are good at and also if there is anything that they need support with. (EuroKids, 2024). This is important because practitioners are able to spot a child's natural talents, which enables them to help the child reach their full potential. They can do this by providing opportunities for the child to develop their talent and

encourage their interest in order to support their journey to success (Williams, 2024). Play is important when observing children because it can help practitioners identify why a child may be experiencing challenging behaviour (Spreeuwenberg, 2022). This is important because by pinpointing what is causing the behaviour, it allows the practitioners to come up with better ways to tackle the challenging behaviour (Long, 2023).

Observing children through play gives practitioners a more accurate reflection of where they are in their development. This is known as play comes naturally to children (Johnson, 2023). It is their way of interacting with the world, learning and developing new skills through exploration and creativity. Children engage in play as a way to experiment, practices problem solving and understand social roles whilst having fun (The Lego Foundation, 2024). Play is also known to reduce anxiety in children and encourage more positive behaviour. By engaging in playful activities, it helps to create a sense of joy and relaxation for the child by allowing them to temporarily escape from their negative emotions (UNICEF, 2022). This is important because by expressing themselves the child finds ways to process their emotions and develop coping skills. Play provides a safe space where the child can experience different situations, resolve conflicts and test boundaries, which helps build emotional resilience (Miracle, 2021). However, play behaviours vary. Each child is unique, which makes the way they play unique. A child's personality impacts on the way they play, some children are extroverts who enjoy interacting with other children and other children may be introverts who prefer solitary play such as colouring or playing video games (Antonella Dési, 2024). Howard and McInnes (2012) state that children show more signs of emotional well-being when they see and activity as play than when they see the same activity as not play.

Adults are able to support a child's holistic development in play by creating a safe environment for children to play. This is essential for their development, well-being, and sense of security. A safe play environment allows children to explore, engage with others, and practice new skills without the risk of harm (schoolhouse, 2024). Adults can also support a child's holistic development through play by offering a variety of open-ended resources, these are things that can be used in different ways. This is important because offering open-ended resources allows children to engage

in meaningful, self-directed learning and play that builds foundational skills across all areas of development. The freedom to explore, create, and problem-solve in their own way gives children the confidence to take on new challenges (Hargraves, 2020). Practitioners can help a child's holistic development through play because observing play overtime allows for consistency. When they observe a child's play regularly, they can track how the child engages with their environment, how they interact with others and the resources available to them. This is important because ongoing observation allows practitioners to identify patters and make informal decisions about how to support the child and guide them (Louis, 2022).

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