

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

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Play is a fundamental aspect of childhood, supporting children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Whitebread, 2012). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines play as "any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise" (UNCRC, 1989, cited in Macdonald, n.d.). However, defining play is complex, as perspectives differ between children and adults (Howard and McInnes, 2013). Despite this, research consistently highlights the significance of play in early childhood education, particularly in supporting holistic development (Pellegrini and Smith, 1998). Physical play involves movement-based activities such as running, jumping, climbing, and balancing (Whitebread, 2012). It supports holistic development by improving motor skills, promoting physical health, and fostering social interactions (Gallahue and Donnelly, 2007). Piaget (1951) proposed that physical play is particularly important in the sensorimotor stage (0-2 years) and the preoperational stage (2-7 years), as children explore their environment and develop coordination through movement. Whereas, Pellegrini and Smith (1998), suggest that physical play enhances cognitive functions by improving spatial awareness and problem-solving abilities. Beyond cognitive benefits, physical play contributes to emotional and social well-being by reducing stress and increasing self-regulation (Eberle, 2014). Activities such as playing 'tag' or climbing encourage teamwork and communication, fostering positive social skills (Gallahue and Donnelly, 2007). Furthermore, studies from Pellegrini and Smith (1998) indicate that children engaging in regular physical play demonstrate higher levels of concentration. They found that primary school children who participated in active break time showed greater attention and task persistence compared to those with limited outdoor play. Similarly, Jarrett et al. (1998) observed that children deprived of break time exhibited more fidgeting and off-task behaviour, suggesting that physical play acts as a mental reset, allowing children to refocus on learning. In terms of resilience, physical play helps children develop critical thinking skills and perseverance through activities like climbing and balancing (Gallahue and Donnelly, 2007). Fisher et al. (2011) found that children who engaged in risk-taking play—such as climbing trees or navigating obstacles—showed greater emotional regulation and adaptability when facing new challenges. Likewise, Bundy et al. (2009) highlighted

that outdoor play encourages risk assessment and self-confidence, key components of emotional resilience. To support physical play in practice, early years practitioners should provide safe environments with access to outdoor play areas, climbing frames, and open spaces (Scottish Government, 2013). Structured activities, such as obstacle course or sensory circuits can enhance physical skills while allowing children the freedom to explore movement-based play (Gallahue and Donnelly, 2007). However, it is essential to ensure play remains child-led and not overly structured, as excessive adult direction may reduce intrinsic motivation (Howard and McInnes, 2013). Pretend play, also referred to as imaginative or dramatic play, involves role-playing real-life or fictional scenarios (MacDonald, n.d.). This type of play is crucial for cognitive and social-emotional development, as it allows children to experiment with separate roles, emotions, and social interactions (Eberle, 2014). According to Piaget (1951), pretend play emerges in the preoperational stage when children begin using symbols to represent objects, enabling them to engage in abstract thinking. Through activities such as pretending to be a doctor or acting out stories, children enhance problem-solving abilities and develop creativity (Bottrill, 2018). One of the most significant benefits of pretend play is its role in language development and emotional regulation (MacDonald, n.d.). Engaging in role-play requires children to use dialogue, enhancing vocabulary and communication skills (Whitebread, 2012). Additionally, pretend play allows children to explore emotions safely, helping them develop empathy and emotional resilience (Howard and McInnes, 2013). Role-play scenarios encourage children to negotiate roles, take turns and collaborate, all of which strengthen social interaction (Whitebread, 2012). A study by Lillard et al. (2013) found that children who participated in frequent pretend play demonstrated higher levels of perspective-taking and empathy, enabling them to better understand others' emotions and viewpoints. These skills are crucial for forming positive peer relationships and resolving conflicts constructively (Lillard et al., 2013). Research by Elias and Berk (2002) shows that social pretend play helps children develop self-regulation and problem-solving skills, encouraging verbal reasoning and compromise over aggression. Similarly, Russ and Dillon (2011) found that imaginative play boosts emotional resilience, helping children manage frustration, negotiate, and express emotions effectively. Supporting pretend play in early years settings involves providing resources such as costumes, themed play

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areas, and open-ended materials that inspire creativity (Scottish Government, 2013).

Practitioners can encourage role-play by setting up environments such as home corners, shops, or small world play areas with dolls and figurines (MacDonald, n.d.).

Self-directed play, is where children choose what to play, how to engage with it, and when to stop, is a fundamental aspect of child development. It enables children to explore their interests and learn autonomously, fostering creativity, problem-solving, and emotional growth (National Children's Bureau, 2007). The role of the adult in self-directed play is essential yet subtle. While adults provide a safe environment and resources for children to engage in free play, they do not dictate the nature of the play itself. Instead, their role is to facilitate, support, and observe the child's cues to ensure that their play remains safe and enriching (MacDonald, n.d.). This form of play, in which children direct their activities without external constraints, is crucial for building autonomy and confidence. Self-directed play is characterised by the child's initiative. Unlike structured activities or directed play, self-directed play allows the child to follow their natural curiosity and decide the direction of their play without adult intervention. According to Besio (2017), free play promotes imagination, creativity, and cognitive flexibility, as children are free to explore various scenarios, create rules, and problem-solve without predefined goals. This autonomy fosters a sense of control and independence that is important for children's cognitive and emotional development. Furthermore, allowing children to choose their activities enables them to express their own ideas and develop a deeper understanding of their preferences and interests (MacDonald, n.d.). The benefits of self-directed play extend to emotional and social development. Through free play, children have opportunities to engage with their peers, experiment with roles, and navigate social dynamics, such as negotiating, taking turns, and resolving conflicts. These experiences contribute to the development of social skills and emotional intelligence, which are essential for building healthy relationships throughout life (National Children's Bureau, 2007). Additionally, when children take the lead in play, they are empowered to explore different emotions and scenarios, helping them to process and understand their feelings (Steiner, 2022). For example, role play often allows children to act out experiences that help them make sense of real-world situations. While free play promotes autonomy and learning, the adult's role in supporting it cannot be overlooked. The adult's primary function is not to control the child's play but to create an environment that encourages independent exploration. This can involve providing open-ended materials, offering a variety of resources that children can use in imaginative ways, and ensuring that the environment is physically safe

(Steiner Connection, 2022). According to O'Connor (2017), the decline in free play has led to a rise in concerns about its long-term effects on children's development, as children who are not given the freedom to play independently may develop lower levels of creativity and problem-solving skills. The adult's task, then, is to preserve an environment that maximises opportunities for self-directed play, with minimal interference unless the child's safety is compromised. A key aspect of facilitating self-directed play is recognising the importance of time. As MacDonald (n.d.) emphasises, children need sufficient time to engage in their activities, free from time constraints imposed by structured schedules or adult expectations. This allows them to fully immerse themselves in the play experience, explore different scenarios, and develop new ideas. Bodrova & Leong (2007) suggests that when children are allowed extended periods of unstructured play, they tend to develop greater problem-solving abilities and exhibit higher levels of concentration. Therefore, adults must ensure that there are ample opportunities for uninterrupted play throughout the day. The rhythm of daily life also plays a significant role in supporting self-directed play. A predictable routine that includes time for free play allows children to settle into their activities and become deeply engaged (MacDonald, n.d.). As Steiner (2022) suggests, play, particularly self-directed play, is akin to a meditative state where children lose themselves in their activities, demonstrating focus and emotional relaxation. This state of deep play is crucial for children's overall well-being, as it enables them to recharge emotionally and mentally. By providing regular opportunities for such play, adults contribute to the child's mental health and developmental progress (Steiner, 2022). One of the most powerful ways adults can support self-directed play is through observation. Instead of directing or interrupting play, adults can observe the child's behaviour, offering support only when necessary. For example, adults can notice if a child is encountering difficulty with a task and offer guidance only when the child's play reaches a natural stopping point (Steiner Connection, 2022). This approach is consistent with Vygotsky's theory of scaffolding, where adults provide just enough support to allow children to build on their existing knowledge while promoting independence. By giving children the space to figure things out for themselves, adults foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills, while also encouraging self-confidence (Vygotsky, 1978). The importance of self-directed play has been emphasised by scholars who warn about the decline in free

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play opportunities in modern society. O'Connor (2017) discusses how academic pressures and an over-reliance on structured activities have reduced the amount of time children spend engaging in free play. The loss of such opportunities can have significant consequences, as it limits children's ability to think creatively and act independently. Without the freedom to explore and make decisions in play, children may struggle with tasks that require innovation or critical thinking later in life (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Therefore, it is crucial for educators and parents to actively reintroduce opportunities for self-directed play in daily routines.

Observation is an essential tool in early childhood education, allowing educators to monitor and understand children's developmental progress, learning styles, and social behaviours. This practice provides practitioners with the ability to assess children's individual strengths and needs, enabling the creation of personalised educational strategies (Bruce et al., 2013). Smidt (2015) asserts that observation is crucial for identifying developmental milestones and areas where children may need additional support. Continuous observation not only informs teaching practices but also shapes each child's individual learning journey, facilitating more inclusive and effective educational approaches (Bruce et al., 2013). Through observation, educators gain valuable insights into a child's needs and behaviours, helping to create a supportive environment that fosters growth and development (McLeod, 2020). The Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS) is a widely used assessment tool designed to track the developmental progress of young children across several domains. Specifically, it evaluates areas such as motor skills, language development, social interactions, and self-care abilities (Bellman et al., 1996). The tool consists of a series of structured observations and activities that assess these different aspects of development, offering a comprehensive picture of a child's growth. By using the SOGS, practitioners can monitor progress over time, helping them identify areas of strength and potential developmental delays (Williams et al., 2013). The structured approach of the tool ensures that observations are both consistent and reliable, making it an effective resource for educators and practitioners working with children across various developmental stages (Bellman et al., 1996). The Schedule of Growing Skills (SOGS) is beneficial in its ability to provide a detailed snapshot of a child's development, helping practitioners identify strengths and potential delays in multiple domains of growth. Early identification of developmental concerns is essential, as it allows for the implementation of targeted interventions that can positively impact the child's progress (Gibb, 2020). Moreover, the tool's capacity for repeated assessments means that practitioners can track progress longitudinally and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions (Smidt, 2015). However, there are some limitations to the SOGS. The broad age bands within the tool may obscure more subtle developmental differences, especially in children near the upper limits of the age range (Bellman et al., 1996). This imprecision can lead to missed nuances in development as it may not capture more fine-grained changes

(Williams et al., 2013). To counterbalance these limitations, it is important that practitioners use SOGS alongside other assessment tools to ensure a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of each child's developmental needs (Gibb, 2020). While Schedule of Growing Skills assesses multiple developmental domains, it may not provide a completely holistic view of the child. Although it evaluates motor skills, language and social interactions, the tool does not address the emotional and psychological aspects of a child's development. Bruce et al., (2013) argue that a holistic view requires an understanding of a child's emotional well-being, social relationships, and responses to different learning environments. the SOGS, focusing primarily on developmental milestones, may overlook key factors influencing a child's overall growth and learning experience (Gibb, 2020). Furthermore, structured tools like SOGS often focus on children's behaviour in specific settings, which may not fully reflect how children behave in natural environments (Smidt, 2015). The Hawthorne effect is a key consideration when using observation tools like the schedule of growing skills. This effect occurs when individuals alter their behaviour because they are aware that they are being observed (McCambridge et al., 2014). In early childhood settings, children may change their behaviours when they know they are under observation, which can distort the validity of the observation results (McLeod, 2020). Smidt (2015), highlights the importance of considering this effect, especially since young children may not fully understand the purpose of observation and may therefore exhibit exaggerated or artificial behaviours. Creating a relaxed, natural environment can help reduce the impact of the Hawthorne effect and encourage children to behave authentically (McCambridge et al., 2014). This ensures that the observations are an accurate reflections of the child's typical behaviour and developmental state (Bruce et al., 2013). Play is a central feature in early childhood development and provides valuable opportunities for observation and assessment. When practitioners observe children in play, they gain significant insight into various aspects of a child's cognitive, emotional, social and physical development (Wood, 2013).

Play allows children to engage in self-initiated activities that demonstrate their skills and abilities in an authentic manner. In contrast to structured assessments, where children may feel pressured, the natural context of play facilitates more accurate reflections of their developmental stages (Ginsburg, 2007). Through play children are often more relaxed, less self-conscious, and more focused on the activity itself than on being observed, which helps to reduce the influence of the Hawthorne effect (McCambridge et al., 2014). The role of play in observation and assessment is fundamental to understanding the whole child. Play offers a multi-faceted view of a child's development, encompassing their social interactions, problem-solving abilities, emotional regulation, and creative thinking (Pyle & Biggs, 2015). For instance, in a collaborative play scenario, children demonstrate their social skills, cooperation, and conflict resolution strategies. These behaviours are often not visible in formal assessments, where children may be asked to complete isolated tasks. By observing children in play, practitioners can gain a more holistic understanding of their development, seeing how children interact with peers and adults, how they manage challenges, and how they express emotions in real-life contexts (Bruce et al., 2013). Play-based observations provide a broader context for understanding children's skills and abilities, making them an invaluable tool for accurate assessment. In addition to the natural authenticity of play, Ginsburg (2007) suggests that it can provide a more accurate reflection of a child's development than traditional assessments. Play engages children's imagination and creativity, allowing them to express complex ideas and problem-solving abilities that may not emerge in formal testing environments. Children are more likely to reveal their developmental strengths, challenges, and preferences through self-initiated play, offering a clearer insight into their abilities (Wood, 2013). Moreover, play-based observations allow for the assessment of key developmental areas, such as social skills, language acquisition, and cognitive development, in a way that mirrors real-life scenarios (Sylva et al., 2004). For example, in a pretend play scenario, children often simulate real-world roles and behaviours, demonstrating their understanding of social roles and their capacity for empathy, negotiation, and communication (Bruce et al., 2013). The role of the adult in facilitating and observing play is also crucial to ensuring the accuracy of assessments. To capture a true reflection of the child's development, it is essential for practitioners to be knowledgeable and skilled in observation techniques.

This includes understanding child development and knowing how to create an enabling environment that supports play (Pyle & Biggs, 2015). By creating a space where children feel comfortable and free to engage in self-directed play, adults can encourage more authentic behaviours, reducing the influence of external pressures such as the Hawthorne effect. Additionally, adults should be familiar with the child's interests, likes, and individual developmental needs, as this helps them to set up play environments that are stimulating, engaging, and appropriate for each child (Howard & McInnes, 2018). A strong understanding of child development allows adults to recognise developmental milestones, identify potential areas of concern, and provide appropriate support during play (Ginsburg, 2007). For instance, an adult who understands the importance of social interactions in a child's development may focus on observing how children negotiate and cooperate with peers during group play activities. Furthermore, when adults stand back and observe rather than actively intervening, they allow children to lead the play and demonstrate their natural abilities. This approach provides a more accurate representation of the child's skills, as children are less likely to feel the pressure of adult expectations. Standing back does not mean abandoning the child; rather, it involves offering subtle guidance and support when necessary, while allowing the child to take the lead in their play (Wood, 2013). This observational stance respects the child's autonomy and fosters a sense of confidence, enabling children to demonstrate their capabilities without feeling judged or evaluated (Bruce et al., 2013). Research by Howard and McInnes (2018) highlights that when practitioners adopt a more passive observational role, children are more likely to engage deeply in play, leading to richer insights into their developmental progress.

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