

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

Two types of play and how these can be supported in practice.

Play Scotland (2024) suggests that play is a child's independence; it should offer a variety of opportunities and risks so that they can discover the world around them. For a child to learn by doing and develop a variety of skills on their own, play should be unstructured, open-ended and support them holistically. It is frequently carried out for no specific outcome but to enable the child to test their own limits. For example, Susan Isaacs theory discusses that play is a demonstration of assertiveness that allows a child to express their feelings safely and to practice ways of coping with a range of emotions, imagination and practical skills. Isaacs thought that through cooperative play, children could discover relationships with family, friends and practitioners, evolve positive social interactions and the emotional advantages of play (Mickelburgh, 2018). National Literacy Trust (2021) believe that play is important because play is learning, it is part of healthy development for the society in which the child grows up in. Play encourages communication, freedom, patience and understanding and it also motivates children to cooperate and play with one another, which advances their social skills. Lastly, it allows an adult to observe the child and determine whether further assessments or support is required.

In the initial phase of play, known as exploratory play, a child uses their senses to investigate objects in their environment. The Edvoacte (2022) implies that it incorporates the child's whole body in the process and makes use of their 5 senses, including taste, touch, smell, listening and seeing. Exploratory play focusses more on the ongoing process rather than the outcome. It enables young children to experience a wide range of exciting adventures while developing abilities including fine and gross motor skills, critical thinking skills and confidence. To expand on this, exploratory play is a type of play which stimulates a child's curiosity since it occurs in a natural setting and allows them to investigate, fail and succeed. TLC (No Date) discuss that exploratory play is important because it enables the child to learn what to do with different objects, for example, while exploring, a younger child may put an object in their mouth, mouthing and handling objects will allow the child to gain a deeper understanding of this object. The child will discover its composition, what you can and cannot do with it and eventually, what it is associated with. However, during exploratory play, an appropriate amount of support is needed to prevent child frustration. Patterson (2018) talks about how effective communication within professional discussions can provide successful opportunities for children to learn through talk with friends and practitioners. The conclusion of this study showed that scaffolding within exploratory talk supports a range of foundational skills.

Vygotsky's theory was primarily sociocultural, which means that he thought that a child's development is greatly impacted by society, social norms, and values. He also believed that

social interaction is what influences cognitive and mental abilities, such as speech and language (Simple Psychology, 2024).

A second type of play that is seen as positively effective within the early years is risky play. Risky play is defined as play that has an element of danger but is also considered exhilarating and thrilling. It is a natural part of childhood play. Kleppe (2018) showed that studies have proven that risky play is precious for the early years because it encourages curiosity which will enable children to experience feelings such as excitement, fear, wonder and uncertainty. Although children need to be protected from harm, risky play is an opportunity for children to experience challenges independently. These challenges will allow them to develop mentally, physically and emotionally, for example, climbing that tree, facing that fear or even becoming familiar and comfortable with the world around them (EYR, 2018). Moreover, children are often deprived of risky play because adults are frequently promoting worry of injury. According to research findings, Patricia *et al* (2021), the prevalence of dangerous play is declining as a result of pedagogy, attitudes toward risk, and presumptions about childhood. However, every child should have the opportunity to experience risky play throughout childhood because it is important. Gaynor (2024) believes that it is important because it helps to develop resilience, problem solving skills, improves their judgement, helps them understand ways to keep safe and it is a fun and memorable experience. In order to support risky play within practice in the early years, the practitioner should take time to discover and reflect on opportunities for risky play, however, while considering these opportunities they need to ensure that the children are kept safe and there are set boundaries. To do this, the practitioner may want to look at larger play equipment for example and ensure that there is appropriate supervision and positioning of the climbing activity. The practitioner may want to set rules, such as keeping one behind the other to avoid overcrowding. These safety measures are then likely to reduce injury and encourage children that are unsure to take part in risky play (Government of Ireland, No Date).

Why it is important for children to choose their own play and the importance of the role of the adult in children's play.

Wood (2014) points out that self-directed play is where children are unconfined from adult instructions, allowing them to take control, experience their agency, self-regulate and choose their own learning path. Play is characterized by choice and studies on children's views frequently demonstrate that they value having time for themselves, being free from direction, and having autonomy. In other words, free play is self-directed play that improves independence, it provides them the opportunity to explore, and do what they choose, when they choose. UNICEF (No Date) claims that free play is crucial because it allows children to experience and learn about the world around them. Through playing, they can express their feelings, explore

their physical surroundings, and expand their language. It is valuable for enhancing creative and imaginative development as well as their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth.

Donner *et al* (2023) says that in many countries, including Finland and Wales, free play is seen as an integral part of children's everyday lives and is a key component of the national curriculum guidelines for early childhood education. It has the potential to foster healthy communities. It expands on the knowledge of how children's play demonstrates their socioemotional competence, as they attempt to take charge of their lives and share them with others. Making secondary modifications in the way they play is one way that children may take charge of their life. Children utilize a variety of techniques in their negotiations, and they will learn to adjust them if they are not working correctly. This gives them a sense of empowerment and helps them accomplish their goals.

For example, Mcleod (2024) discusses that Freud's theory focuses on 5 stages of psychosexual development, these include the oral stage, anal stage, phallic stage, latency stage and the genital stage. He felt that the experiences we made as children molded our personalities and had a significant impact on our adult life and he believed that via their encounters with the outside world, children grow to have confidence in who they are and what they can do.

Nevertheless, although the curriculum encourages self-directed play, adults still need to provide suitable support. When considering the correct support for children during play, a practitioner may think about becoming an enabling adult to supply engaging experiences and effective environments so that the children feel safe and develop in a range of aspects. According to UWTSD (No Date), allowing a child to make their own decisions and play freely has its advantages, so when carrying out a professional role and thinking about interacting correctly, learn how to spot the play cycle. SmartKid's (2022), implies that the play cycle has 6 main stages, the metaludes, the notion or thinking that will initiate the entire process in the child's mind, the play que, a display or gesture out to the world, return, where another child notices the play que of the other child and decides to take part, frames, the children begin to use their imagination or create a set of rules, flow, the children are immersed in play and finally, annihilation, where a child ends the play. Therefore, a professional may want to think about being invited in or using simple engagement, for example, when an adult is passively inside the play frame but is not taking part in the play, the adult can serve as a resource to help sustain and progress the play cycle. Moreover, Ivrendi (2020) study shows further roles that an adult can carry out during child's play, these involve staying just out of the play cycle to meet their needs when they need support with building something or organising their play. Another illustration may be adopting a minor part as opposed to a large one while still allowing the children to direct the course of their play. Lastly, it could even be as simple as rekindling a child's curiosity by introducing new or alternative materials and themes to revive play when they lose interest.

For example, Erikson suggested 8 stages of development, throughout stage 3 and 4 he said that this is where children begin to feel in control of their surroundings through play and social interactions and if their new skills are not supported or acknowledged, the child will feel valueless (Very Well Mind, 2022).

Individual Child Observations.

Children First (2021) maintains that an individual child observation is where practitioners observe a child cautiously to discover their needs. They will do this by watching, to become familiar with their likes and dislikes and recognise their current development, listening, in order to notice their language and communication with peers, and recording their doings to keep note of their key characteristics. Speeuwenberg (2022) suggests that individual child observations are principle for a diversity of reasons, they help to identify behavior problems and why the child may be having them, it can show how the child interacts with others and their forming of relationships, observations may point out special needs that will then need further support, they highlight skills and overall, it will provide the practitioner with a better understanding of the child and give them the opportunity to look at their holistic development (development as a whole).

Maria Montessori's theory focusses on a child centered environment. She believed that a child should be allowed to take their own responsibility to thrive independently and that play, and learning should meet a child's needs and interests. To achieve this, she based her teachings on scientific observations to notice a child's emotional, social, physical and cognitive progress. (Rockingham Montessori School, 2021).

Laser Systems (2016) says that one way you can carry out an individual observation is by using a movement tracker. A movement tracker is an observation that centralizes on the child's preferred place of spending time and is regularly carried out to pick up on something specific, for example, why the child is moving from activity to activity so regularly, it may be because the environment is not meeting their needs, triggering their curiosity or impacting their holistic development. Usually, the record commences with a drawing of the room's layout, with arrows representing the location of where they chose to go. Times are periodically supplied to show how much time the child spends in each location. Peterson and Elan (2021) say that a movement tracker is an informal, unplanned method that provides the practitioner with a deeper understanding of the child's strengths and shortcomings, frequently aids in identifying special needs, and helps the practitioner to create an environment that supports the child's learning while considering the child's abilities, likes, and dislikes. Movement records may also demonstrate why a certain child is behaving in a certain way and why the child's emotions are overly hyperactive or emotional. Finally, movement records can also support the practitioner in recognising skills such as social skills because they can observe how the child reacts with their peers and if they are able to communicate their needs. A movement record is seen as successful

when the practitioner has observed without interfering, the descriptive results allow the reader to picture the image in their head and when the observer has found what they are looking for. Although, movement trackers also have weaknesses, they are frequently a difficult technique to implement since they necessitate careful observation, which may not be feasible in particular situations and surroundings as a result of staffing shortages or physical limitations in the area itself (Study Prism, 2024). To add to that, they are also time consuming and an expensive method to carry out which may be an issue for settings that struggle with funding.

For example, Nasri *et al* (2022) carried out a study using a movement tracker in a schoolyard environment to recognise children's social activity and whether the yard was affecting children positively or negatively. It was used to look at individual productiveness of the environment on children's behaviour, it measured location, communication, activities and looked at their physical, social and cultural actions.

The role of play when undertaking observations and assessments of children. How this affects the child's engagement and the accuracy of the observation.

Salcuni *et al* (2017) summaries that play is important when carrying out assessments because it plays a huge part in child development, it provides children with great opportunity and helps practitioners recognise whether interventions need to be put into place for certain children. We can witness the nature of children's play and engagement when we approach child observation with a sense of curiosity. We may learn about children's knowledge, skills, progress and emotions through play observation and assessment, and we can use this knowledge to ensure that how we communicate with them and the resources we offer are closely matched to their needs and capabilities. Birth to 5 Matters (2021) says that when carrying out assessments, the planning cycle implies that play is also beneficial because it allows the practitioner to notice a child's relationship with their peers and who impacts them the most, it also enables the caregiver to view this particular child in the larger scheme, including their families, communities, and cultures. Observing children will also represent different play types for different children, the less capable children may take part in more sensory play due to being less structured, whereas the more capable children may take part in imaginative play, for example, Bauer and Giplin (2023) tells us that the children that took part in imaginative play were better at expressing their emotions to their classmates and had more control over their vocabulary.

Piaget believed that it was important that children interacted with all types of play because different types of play have a different type of effect on their development. He said that it helps to create knowledge on the effects of their actions and whether they are appropriate for the current situation (Psychologized, 2023).

Azilo Training (2019) implies that observing children during play provides a more accurate reflection of where they are in development because as they explore and play freely, practitioners can pick up on their level of development and decide whether they are at the correct stage. It allows the practitioner to look at whether the child's surroundings and available materials are promoting their growth, and what kind of long-term assistance they will require to pick up new passions and capabilities. Early years careers (2016) believes that play observation offers multiple advantages. These include observing the child's behaviors and bonding patterns, learning how the child responds to activities, observing the child's language and skill development, and, finally, enabling the practitioner to assess the environment's efficacy. The curriculum of Wales strongly feels that play is a must during early years and that it offers the best start to life (Hwb, 2023). Moreover, to further support this information, one may compare it to observing a child during structured, sat at desk activities. This type of education prevents the teacher from developing an understanding of the student as a whole; the student cannot explore their environment, engage with their senses, or form significant connections. It has been argued that this kind of learning is not beneficial in the long term since it prevents children from learning critical life skills including creativity from a lack of exploration, social engagement from social isolation, and problem-solving skills due to attention deficit (Smith and Wasmuth, 2017).

Furthermore, the way in which adults can support and observe play is by analysing, making sense of what is happening and by having the knowledge to relate to theory. One way in which a practitioner can support learning through play is by providing a setting that is going to stimulate the child's development in many ways. Enabling environments are seen as learning settings; they are fundamental to a child's growth and development and should be thoughtfully designed with high-quality toys and opportunities to pique curiosity and excitement. Hwb (2023) - The Curriculum in Wales suggests that in order to effectively carry out an assessment the practitioner should focus on the different areas of learning, provide the correct provision and plan based on play to result in shaping the child's future successfully. There are 4 purposes to this: one is to create enterprising, creative contributors, someone who is bold, ambitious and influencing. To do this, the practitioner may want to use different materials for exploration, emphasize on the process not the outcome, get involved to give examples and provide insight, supply firsthand experiences and the opportunity to take part in risky play and finally, having a positive attitude to encourage the child to try new activities that will trigger their senses and curiosities (Ogata, 2013). However, bear in mind that although getting involved to support children, whether it be because they are finding something difficult or because the practitioner wants to encourage real life context, as mentioned previously, always think about the play cycle. Oxfordshire (No Date) says that play cues are what a knowledgeable practitioner will look for before interrupting a child's play, play cues are often a look or motion to welcome another person or something in their environment to take part in their activity. Overall, Amin (2021) believes that a practitioner's

role in play is to allow the child to experience it for themselves, face challenges to improve problem solving skills and communicate depending on their own needs. However, support them, when necessary, provide new ideas when the child loses interest and be there to assist problems to come up with a solution.

To illustrate, Howard and McInnes (2013) carried out a study and their findings showed that adults must let go of their preconceived notions of what play is and adopt a child's point of view in order to respect children's choosing and authority over their learning experiences. This can be achieved by using the cues that children use to define play and by implementing a play-based curriculum to have the capacity to enhance the children's pleasure.

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