

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

Play is a crucial part of a child's brain development and for their communication and language skills to mature (Keenan, Evans and Crowley, 2016). Keenan, Evans and Crowley (2016) continue to state that Bandura believed children, from an early age learn by observing their peers and copying what they do. Their World (2021) suggest that play consists of activities performed for self-amusement, should be fun and engaging and allow children the opportunity to explore the environment around them.

Two different types of play that will be discussed in this document are Symbolic and Constructive Play.

When a child starts to use different objects to represent or symbolise another object such as, a banana as a phone for example, this is what is known as symbolic play (Lewis, 2020). BabySparks (2017) states that symbolic play is a time where children get to be creative. Before symbolic play a block is still considered as a block, although during symbolic play a block can be whatever the child imagines it to be, such as a car, a building, or even a phone. Lewis (2020) states that symbolic play can start as early as three months old, although a cognitive shift happens when the baby is around 18 months old that gives them the ability to understand that one object can represent another. BabySparks (2017) add that symbolic play is important in laying the foundation for many other areas of development.

According to Vygotsky, in order to aid a child's healthy development, symbolic play is essential (Lewis, 2020). In addition, it encourages children to overcome their impulsiveness and develop behaviours that will assist them with more complicated cognitive functions. Bodrova and Leong (2015) states Vygotsky believed the following areas are strengthened when children participate in symbolic play.

Cognitive Skills - As children play, they tend to act out 'real-life' experiences and are able to exercise their imagination. This helps to create new neural pathways and gives them the skills to help problem solve as they grow older.

Social Skills – Symbolic play encourages children to use their imagination, not every child will imagine certain objects to be the same as the others. This teaches children to negotiate and cooperate.

Language – Children's minds need to be developed in order to understand that one object can symbolise another. Play is a great way to build vocabulary and is the first step in language acquisition.

Motor Skills – The actions children take helps to improve their fine and gross motor skills.

Lewis (2020) suggests that a good way to encourage and support symbolic play is to let the child be free to explore and use their imagination and sit back and observe them. Furthermore, Play Scotland (2022) state that theorist Bob Hughes believed that when adults let the child take control of their own play it builds self-esteem. Expose the children with a variety of toys and objects and rotate them so the children do not get bored. Providing role play areas will encourage children to use their imagination and socialise with their peers (Lewis, 2020).

Constructive play is when children use different materials or toys to build or create something (Arnerich, 2021). Children may be organised with their objects and focus on achieving their goal of building something. This will help to develop many useful skills (Lewis, 2020). Constructive play is usually noticed in children around the age of two, when they can focus on one activity for extended periods (Arnerich, 2021). Furthermore, Arnerich (2021) states Piaget suggests children before the age of two have been through a stage known as functional play. This means they are familiar with how certain materials feel and understand the different sizes and had some experiences to prevent them from falling. The key to constructive play is that children are making something intentionally and creatively. They are encouraged to be curious and approach that hands-on (Wardle, 2015).

Arnerich (2021) suggests that constructive play does not just build children's co-ordination skills, but directly benefits other skills such as;

Math – Exploring shape sizes, symmetry and counting.

Science – Experiencing gravity and balance in action.

Creativity – Bringing their ideas to life.

Curiosity – Being inquisitive and exploring materials.

Language – Adults can scaffold with complex vocabulary.

Cooperation – Children learn how to work together.

Constructive play is open ended, adults can support this by allowing the children to play freely (Pgpedia, 2022). Arnerich (2021) states Piaget believed this is the best way for children to relate their own ideas to the real world. By providing children with resources that are not designed to be built in a specific way, it allows children to interpret them in different ways. Resources that could be provided are different shapes of wood, sticks and other natural materials, sand and tools, car tyres, building blocks, cogs and wheels, and pipes. It is important to consider the developmental stages when deciding what resources to provide for the children. Introducing a larger variety of unusual elements may be more beneficial in older children's play (Arnerich, 2021).

Constructive play is messy, and it is important for the adult not to get too involved when children are bringing their creations to life (Pgpedia, 2022). It is worth adults leaving the children's creations out and not tidying them up in order for the children to come back to it and continue with their ideas (Arnerich, 2021).

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

Their World (2021) suggest adults should let play be child directed. Adults should see what interests the child and provide them with the resources to explore that and use their imagination, as play is whatever the individual wants it to be and is important in enriching learning and contributing to their development (Hutt, 2002). Keenan, Evans and Crowley (2016) suggest play has social, behavioural, and psychomotor rewards by participating in activities with others around them. Homan (2016) advises that when children are given the chance to be themselves and engage in free play, wonderful things can be achieved. In addition, children learn to problem solve and invent interesting and different ways of resolving

problems, as well as developing their cognitive development. Adults are advised to take a step back, and to try and stay out of any conflicts unless intervention is absolutely necessary. This will encourage children to learn how to negotiate and deal with conflict (Homan, 2016). Welsh Government Play Policy (2002) agrees and states when children are allowed to direct their own play, this means they themselves decide the rules and roles they take on within their play. The children's play is intrinsically motivated, meaning the play is undertaken for no other reason than enjoyment, there is no end goal or reward.

It is recognised that children have the right to rest and leisure, and to engage in play and activities appropriate to their age in accordance with Article 31 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 2021). In the current Foundation Phase, Welsh Government (2019) stresses the importance of play in children's healthy development. It helps to build their self-esteem and their place in society. In addition, the current Foundation Phase allows children to develop a positive attitude towards learning and encourages independence and be able to make mistakes without fear of failure (Welsh Government, 2019).

Children are able to develop their imagination during self-directed play and although it is important for the adult to take a step back, many children will welcome the input of an adult to get started, such as finding objects to play with or thinking of ideas (Play Wales, 2021). It is beneficial for practitioners to be enabling adults and provide endless play possibilities for the children (Welsh Government, 2021). Providing children with everyday items to use however they want is often the starting point for creativity and imaginative play. Adults do not have to spend a lot of money on toys or objects to entertain their children, providing them with items like cardboard boxes, old sheets, pots and pans, rope, old tyres, pebbles or sticks for example will provide endless fun and enjoyment for young children (Play Wales, 2021). Keenan, Evans, and Crowley (2016) suggest that active play contributes to a child's holistic wellness and development and is a good way of obtaining new knowledge. Furthermore, children learn many social and interpersonal skills through play. By sharing toys, they learn the value of give and take and waiting in line teaches them patience.

The Reggio Emilia approach is a pedagogy focused on pre-school and primary education. This approach is child led and encourages the adult to act as a teacher and resource (Scholastic, 2021). In addition, the approach allows children to develop a sense of identity by allowing them to explore new ideas and develop existing skills (Wurm, 2005). Adults can enable children's experiences by providing them with safe outdoor areas to play, as children often talk and communicate more on the playground than they do indoors playing solitary games (Welsh Government, 2021). It is important for adults to know when it is appropriate to intervene in children's play. Adults should be there as a resource and for reassurance, and to act as conflict resolution should situations escalate where a child's safety might be compromised (Rymanowicz, 2015).

Child led play is also a good way to observe what a child might be experiencing in their home life, as children will often 'play out' their life experiences, allowing adults to understand things from their perspective, although this is not always the case (Dowling, 2014). This will allow adults to intervene if necessary, ensuring the child's needs are being met and are being taken care of appropriately.

In-depth discussion and understanding of an observation method for young children.

There are several different observation methods to consider when thinking about children's development. The Leuven Scale method is what will be discussed in this document. Ferre Leavers and his team at Leuven University in Belgium developed the Leuven Scale form of assessment. It is a five-point scale that allows practitioners to measure a child's 'emotional well-being' and 'involvement'. These are two vital components of development, learning and progress in children (Cheqdin, 2019). Cheqdin (2019) continue to suggest that children who are comfortable in their environment, eager to experiment and explore and are confident individuals are in a high state of 'well-being'. However, children who appear anxious, frightened or dependent on others making it harder for them to learn and explore their potential may be experiencing low levels of 'well-being'.

High levels of 'involvement' could look like children who are fascinated, curious and have a genuine interest in what they are doing. These characteristics are an indicator of 'deeper-level', meaningful learning. In addition, these signs of 'involvement' are directly linked to the characteristics of effective teaching and learning as set out by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (MacRae and Jones, 2020).

The observation scale from one to five is used for practitioners to observe the degree to which a child will involve themselves in a self-chosen activity. The five levels of involvement and well-being on the Leuven Scale include:

Leuven Scale for Emotional Well-Being

Extremely low – Children may seem withdrawn or frightened and express aggressive behaviour, hurting themselves or others around them. Children crying or screaming indicates signs of distress.

Low – Practitioners may notice children's body language indicates they are uncomfortable or feeling uneasy.

Moderate – Children's posture and expressions are neutral, they do not show signs of sadness, happiness, comfort or discomfort.

High – Children appear happy and cheerful, although not always expressed with the same intensity.

Extremely high – Children show signs of spontaneity and expressiveness and appear happy, confident and lively. They show no signs of stress or tension.

Leuven Scale for Levels of Involvement

Extremely low – Children may show a lack of energy and seem passive or show signs of repetitiveness.

Low – Children may seem absent-minded and struggle to focus on a task for long periods of time.

Moderate – Children will involve themselves in activities but may not show much energy or connection.

High – Children will be engrossed in the activity they are doing and do not get easily distracted.

Extremely high – Children are focused and show signs of creativity and are lively and persistent during activities.

Cheqdin (2019) states Ferre Leavers suggested that once observations have been made, practitioners should translate the assessments into a practical action plan. Ways in which an action plan can improve children's well-being and involvement include swapping out the activity areas of a classroom for something more appealing for the children. Assessing the various toys or reading books in specific areas and replacing with some more challenging. Introduce new or non-traditional materials or objects to spark the children's curiosity. After observing what interests the children, practitioners could provide activities that engage their interests. MacRae and Jones (2020) also add that practitioners should encourage the children and provide stimulating inputs and support them to develop positive relationships with practitioners and other children. Furthermore, introduce activities that allow children to explore their emotions, feelings and values. After observations practitioners should be able to identify children with emotional problems and set out a plan for any necessary interventions. Lastly, practitioners will be able to identify children with developmental needs and intervene to encourage high levels of involvement.

Having an action plan clearly set out is useful for practitioners and can be used as a tool to ensure equal learning opportunities for each child. Cheqdin (2019) suggests it is beneficial for practitioners to use this technique as it ensures they are providing the correct emotional and physical environment for learning. MacRae and Jones (2020) state that the Leuven Scale attunes practitioners to a child's involvement as a measure of quality. The more engaged the child is in an activity, the richer their learning experience will be and make them think more complexly. This knowledge of the child's experience creates a cultivating effect in adults that Leavers describes as an 'empathetic understanding'.

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

Children's play during observations and assessments allows the observer to collect important information about the child and the ability to understand them as an individual (Fromberg and Bergen, 1998). These observations form a part of the EYSF assessment and planning cycle and is an essential tool for practitioners to use as a basis for reflection. Fromberg and Bergen (1998) continue to suggest that play gives practitioners an understanding of the child's development and learning. In addition, being able to see a child's learning in action allows practitioners to create a plan to further extend the child's skills and abilities.

Theorist Piaget believes that children are active explorers and use play to gain knowledge through a process of accommodation and assimilation (Fromberg and Bergen, 1998). Therefore, children are able to organize their own world and reflect on their growing intellect. Piaget believed there were three stages of play development: sensorimotor, games with rules, and symbolic. When children play, this allows practitioners to observe these stages of the maturing intellect in the same way they might observe the changing stages of motor behaviour and language. Piaget believed there were linkages and correlations between play behaviour and skill development in areas like language, social and motor skills when children's development was observed in the joyful activity of play (Fromberg and Bergen, 1998).

It is important to consider the 'Play Cycle' when observing children. Oxfordshire.gov (2021) suggest that the play cycle is a deeply intriguing way of depicting children's play process. The play cycle can be used to understand play better and how practitioners can support play.

Children communicate through play cues. This can be in the form of body language, eye contact, verbal communication or copying what their peers are doing. This will then be followed by a return by whoever the child is trying to communicate with. There are physical, narrative and emotional frames to consider in the play cycle also. When play is exploring a particular feeling, the props, action, story and the place continue to change as it is the experience of the feeling that holds it together. When there is a play return and frame, flow occurs and can last from a few minutes to weeks' worth of play. Adulteration is a term to describe practitioners interfering in play. Practitioners may try to get involved in play or rescue it or try to improve it, however, it is important for practitioners to stand back and observe (Play Wales, 2021). At the end of the play cycle play is 'annihilated'. This means either the child themselves has ended the play or often it is the adult that annihilates the play, for example, on the school yard when the bell rings that signifies play annihilation as play time has come to an end.

Childcare.gov (2018) state through ongoing observations, this allows practitioners to learn about children's strengths, skills, knowledge, needs, interests, and any barriers there are to learning. There are many factors to consider when making observations, such as who is taking the observation. If a setting is having someone unfamiliar come in to do observations of the children, then the children might feel uneasy and therefore act differently than they would under normal circumstances, therefore not giving a true reflection of that child (Childcare.gov, 2018). However, having a practitioner within the setting who the children are already comfortable with to do the observation may be more beneficial as the children will be more likely to engage as they normally would. Environmental factors should also be taken into consideration, such as how many staff a setting has, maybe there is a shortage on that day, or the environment is too busy for certain children causing them to act differently. The child may also be tired on the day they are being observed, in turn not giving a true reflection of the child on that day. Observations do not always give much insight into the child's home life either, it is important to have good relationships with parents in order to gain this information as it may help understand the child better in the setting (Hostettler Scharer, 2018). Although observations help practitioners gain knowledge of children's needs, sometimes any additional needs a child might have may be missed. Having observations carried out by specialised practitioners can help make the correct decisions regarding the child and ensuring the decisions are child centred and communicated well with other practitioners and parents (Hostettler Scharer, 2018).

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