

Children's Play: Theory and Practice

Play is so critically important to all children in the development of their physical, social, mental, emotional and creative skills that society should seek every opportunity to support it and create an environment that fosters it.

(Welsh Government, 2014)

Types of play.

The Welsh and Scottish Governments have both recognised the play types identified and described by Bob Hughes, a play theorist. A key aspect for the Early Years Practitioner is to recognise the slightly different types of play and how it is relevant for engagement with the child to take place as this is necessary for a healthy child's development. Equally important is for the adult to recognise contrasting opportunities throughout the day, furthermore, appreciate the time needed for the child to develop and be mindful that there is no visible focus or end result expected. Additionally, have knowledge of the variety of skills the child will be learning through play. For example, a child's thinking and problem skills will expand, using different materials will give the child sensory experiences and promote their creativity skills in other areas of learning (Casey, T and Scott-McKie, L 2017). Play is a fundamental part of a child's life, development and learning. There are various types of play that can describe the behaviour of a child, leading to and contributing to children's physical, emotional and social development. Creative Play involves a wide range of materials, objects and tools, for experiential play, it is also seen as the most visible play is an early years setting. Creative play requires a considerable amount of time for children to experience enjoyment and self-expression. In the same way, creativity shares many characteristics and can be surprising and exciting for a child. It can be explored and expressed in many ways, promoting a child's curiosity, problem solving and exploration of the environment around them. Promoting creative play does not have to be expensive, different materials can give numerous opportunities and reused time after time. The more unusual the materials, that cost very little, can support that spark of creativity for the child. It is important to understand that the child needs to be in control of the play. If a limit is put on play, then we are putting a limit on the child's thinking and options to explore (PlayWales 2017). Montessori educators recognise how important the environment is to the development of a child and class themselves as guardians of the spaces around them. This results in the child developing at the

pace which is right for each individual, therefore creativity is given the time required and supports the learning of the child. Environments are created to stimulate the child and they are free to learn naturally as an individual, including senses as they are important in children's learning and children take greater responsibility for their learning (Macblain, 2014).

The Early Years Foundation Stage, (2007) describe exploratory play as a child having opportunities to choose activities and gaining those important first hand experiences. Children are given the choice to play alone if they wish, alongside other children or with other children and adults. The EYFS state that exploratory play has to have suitable space, allowing children time and most importantly, giving them a variety of choice. This type of play can promote children to challenge themselves, problem solve and explore, with a range of activities created a child's confidence will grow. Play is described as multi-layered, where children can build on experiences they have had from an earlier , they can recall and repeat previous play situations, this builds confidence and over time they feel secure to involve other children. Play outdoors is recognised as an important part of a child's development. Froebel, McMillan and Montessori placed a high emphasis on this type of play and learning environments for young children (Bilton, 2002). According to Bruce, T (2011) Froebel identifies there being a difference between play and work. When children have the choice to initiate their own play and work as a focus task that they are required to complete. He further states that work does not support the creativeness of the child. He believes that adults can be involved play, to encourage and support the child but also to intervene when appropriate. A prominent feature in a Reggio pre-school is the physical environment, the use of the space and how light and colour is used. The spaces used by the children are described as beautiful, personal and welcoming, making the child feel safe and secure. They are carefully created to support a child's development, develop creativity and curiosity through opportunities for exploration and research (Thornton and Brunton, 2005).

According to, Moyles, J (2013), it is important for children to have choice when play is involved. It is intrinsically motivated and it can support children to become self-determined. At the heart of play, imagination can take over when it is free and there are choices for the child. Play can become more creative and flexible for the child if there is freedom in play and a variety of choice, this will result in the child having control

over their individual experiences that they may not have in an adult world. Children who have the opportunity of free choice, this can support their attitude and they become more accepting in learning situations and the environment. It also supports the child when they experience new situations and changes, the child learns to learn and manage feelings and emotions. Play is a key experience to build on what the child already knows. For Early Years Practitioners, observing is an important skill, it can give crucial knowledge of the child, their level and skill while they are in play. In play, adults need to ensure that the environment is safe and secure and understand why and how children play, observe and listen to the child, this is the best way to understand them and support the child's development. For an adult to participate in the child's play they need to be playful themselves, this will show the child acceptance and determine the child's response to the adult. Play can support to develop a child's sense of self and self-esteem, show empathy and care towards others and children will push themselves and the boundaries if environments are free, increasing their independence. Furthermore, emotional and cognitive self-regulation development is interlinked to play. Bottrill, G (2018) identifies play as a vital component for development of a child. And states that an Early Years Practitioner needs to identify what a child truly needs. He suggests that a child needs the adult to listen to them, to watch them, to join in – only if the child wants them to. He encourages the adult to participate with the child. He argues that unless this can be done you cannot truly understand the child. The child must be the center of the environment and the adult's mind, no talking just listening, to have a greater understanding of the children. Furthermore, he states that setting up continuous provision is actually stopping the child's learning and development, he describes this as 'putting a cap on it'. (p22) It can be seen that, limiting the child's choices the adult is controlling the experiences for the child, display a range of resources so the child can has access and can choose independently. A child who has the choice, can create endless opportunities and children have the decision, if they want to, to challenge themselves with limitless possibilities. He describes play as freedom where children can engage and express themselves. He further suggests that forty-five minutes is the shortest amount of time needed for a child to experience deep, meaningful play and be highly engaged in the activity. Tovey,H *et al* (2010) suggests early years practitioners need to engage with children where there are challenges and uncertainty. Furthermore, practitioners need to have knowledge of children's play and how competent the children are in tricky

situations to avoid injury. The environment for children should encourage exploration, imagination and challenges to support development of the child.

In a study regarding play, children who perceive an activity as play, show more signs of emotional well-being and show less when they believe it is an activity. The findings from this study also propose that practitioners need to understand children's views regarding play and use this information to increase the development of play (Howard, J and McInnes, K 2013).

Complementary to this, studies show play may be considered as an approach to learning instead of play, if an adult is present. Children identify play if there is no adult involved, suggesting the way adults present themselves can determine what the child believes is play. Adult presence can suggest control, choice and open questions and it is suggested, further development in this area is needed to maximise play and maximise child learning (McInnes, K, Howard, J Crowley, K and Miles, G 2013)

The Foundation Phase Profile (FPP), is an important part of the Welsh Government's Early Years Development and Assessment Framework. The FPP is seen as an assessment tool to support practitioners in identifying the learning and development of children. The purpose for this profile is to provide consistency throughout Wales for baseline assessments. Using observations and formative assessments, it supports the practitioners to plan a holistic curriculum to guide and support the needs of the child. The assessments used link very carefully with other professionals in this area which gives consistency for the child's development and furthermore, it can establish delay of development, special educational needs and additional learning needs to give support to children who need it the most. Additionally, it provides useful information between child care settings and transitions, which support children's learning and development. The methods of observations provide a consistent national method for scoring outcomes and progress. There are two profiles which can be used, the Compact Profile and the Full profile, the structure of both profiles are made up sets of skills ladders in four areas of learning. The areas of learning consist of Literacy, Language and Communication, Mathematics and Numeracy, Personal and Social Development and finally Physical development. For example, outcomes recorded reflect the skills acquired and developed in the area of learning. The Compact Profile is described as a snapshot of a child's development before a baseline assessment is

completed and will produce an individual outcome from each area of learning. The Full Profile, is again described as a snapshot of a child's development, however all skill ladders are used and can produce an individual outcome, consistent with the Compact Profile. Subsequently, children are observed throughout the day where there are a wide range of experiences and activities. As recognised, there is a slight difference between both profiles and the Compact Profile is used more to support end of phase teacher assessments. Equally important, is the involvement of parents and carers in the development of their child, using the profile assessments, communication with the adults can give valuable information to provide summative judgements on their child's current stage of learning and development.

The profile is an important tool, which can be used in a nursery setting or school, from the age of three, creating a baseline to track development up to the end of year two. Although it is for very young children and those that are in early stages of development, both profiles are comparable as they have identical outcomes on the scales used. Another essential point is the profile records children's achievements from their entry into the setting, supporting practitioners to plan the next steps in their learning and development and offering differentiation in activities.

The Compact profile is used as an observation tool, over a time span of six weeks, when a child first starts in a new class. This is to create a baseline assessment which is individual to the child. The skills are chosen, specifically for this assessment because they are seen as easy to observe and provide the relevant information required to identify a child's development and provide the evidence to support this. In the same way, it supports practitioners understanding of learning styles and interests, the foundation phase pedagogy and the developmental stages of a child. The findings from this profile are reported to the Welsh Government. The Full Profile is similar, however it includes all skill ladders for each area of learning and is used to establish an end of phase outcome at the end of year two. It creates a wider picture of progress accomplished and what is needed to support a child to develop further. To support a baseline assessment, practitioners need to review information already collected from professionals concerning the child and plan continuous provision for the first six weeks, having in mind the skill ladders that are used in the assessment. Although there is no set method of recording observations, it is advised that evidence is sourced across the four areas of learning and plan appropriate activities for further

observations to take place. Estyn will focus their attention on the accuracy of the assessments, therefore it is important that practitioners are confident in their assessments of children's abilities and how the settings are used to support the children's learning. Inspectors will want to see samples of individual profiles, scrutinize children's work and talk to the children to ensure the accuracy of the assessments. As a result, this profile shows that it is suitable for all children and support the early identification of special educational needs and additional learning needs as it is used for very early stages of child development (Welsh Government, 2017).

However, there is significant changes being made in Wales regarding the curriculum and assessment guidelines was updated on January 11th this year. These changes cement the new role of assessment as integral to the curriculum design and are opposed to a key stage summative approach. Furthermore, it is linked to the continuum of progression from age three to sixteen (Welsh Government 2022).

Likewise, the Enabling learning guidance has been developed to support practitioners in schools and settings in planning, designing and implementing a curriculum appropriate for all learners. Therefore, it is seen that this can also be used as a tool to support evaluation of quality and impact of curriculum design for learners' progress. (Welsh Government 2022)

According to Bruce, T (2011) children naturally learn from their own actions, suggesting play is a significant part of a child's life and observations are fundamental to their learning and development. She suggests the emphasis is looking and identifying what the child is able to do and planning the next steps that are appropriate for the child. Additionally, observations identify the link between play and learning to gain an insight into a child's participation, social and cultural worlds. Furthermore, observations support practitioners to plan efficiently, this will ensure children have a sense of belonging and feel included, assessments show progress of a child and the use of evaluations to look at what is being offered for the child, therefore play is key to observing children for them to develop creativity and imagination.

Many identify play as a tool to engage with children, supporting their knowledge and developing their skills and understanding, and through observations this can support progression for a child but also effective practice for the practitioner. However, it has been suggested that brief observations are less meaningful to gain learning outcomes

and instead continuous observations are recommended for better understanding of a child, not interfering but having that highly skilled way to approach children, when children play and listening to conversations with their peers. Using pedagogical strategies, this will enable practitioners to use a responsive approach to start a conversation with a child and support their knowledge, skills and understanding. (Broadhead, P, Howard, J and Wood,E (2010).

It is important to recognise that observations and documentation are fundamental characteristics of the Reggio approach and throughout the day adults observe and document children's responses. The adults support each other to identify different perspectives on children's learning and decide what opportunities and activities to offer the following day. It is clear to see that adults take on an active role with the child, controlling the activities and instigating conversations and discussions with the child to support the child to remember and reflect on previous situations or activities (UK Study Tour 2000b, cited in Thornton *et al* 2005).

Aubrey, K and Riley, A(2019) state that Vygotsky proposed play as an essential part of a child's intellectual development and learning and believed play to be equally as important as learning in school. Play, he believed, generate the zone of proximal development in which children build information and develop from others. The zone describes what a child can do independently and what a child can do with support of a trusted adult. Also important is the experiences the child has to develop skills and suggests imagination comes from action and play, children will copy the behaviour of an adult, gaining involvement in their social environment and can only be obtained through adults and peers. Vygotsky identified these experiences as opportunities for learning and called them scaffolding. Piaget also recognised play as important for cognitive development of a child. He suggests that play can show how a child thinks and learns. Additionally, interactions between a child and the environment through play generate learning, curiosity and challenges children to be in control through their interactions. He recognised Montessori had the same value of importance of play and how children absorb knowledge and he linked this to his stages of development, stating that for each stage, a different type of play can be observed.

Sharman, C, Cross, W and Vennis, D, (2000) similarly, observing and listening to children is a way to identify the level of their development, compare progress with their

peers and support planning further activities. Observing children support practitioners knowledge of what or why children do something, but it is important to be mindful that not all children develop at the same pace and there can be influences and experiences affecting the child.

Mildred Parten defined play into 6 stages to marry up with their social development. She believed that learning to play was learning how to relate to others. Play evolves for children as they grow and develop. All types of play can be at any age, however some play can relate to a stage of development or specific age group. How children interact and explore can be seen as play. (American Parks Company, 2020)

Reference List

American Parks Company. (2020) *The Twelve Types of Play and What They Mean to Children*. Available at: <https://www.americanparkscompany.com/blog/types-of-play-for-children>. (Accessed 29th January 2022).

Aubery, K and Riley, A. (2019) *Understanding & Using Educational Theories*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE.

Bilton, H. (2002) *Outdoor play in the early years :management and innovation*. 2nd ed. London: David Fulton.

Bottrill, G. (2018) *Can I go & play now? Rethinking the Early Years*. London: SAGE.

Broadhead, P, Howard, J and Wood, E. (2010) *Play and Learning in the Early Years*. London: SAGE.

Bruce, T. (2011) *Early Childhood Education*. Oxon: Hodder Education.

Casey, T and Scott-McKie, L. (2017) *Play Types Toolkit. Bringing more play into the school day*. Available at: <https://www.playscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/Play-Scotland-Play-Types-Toolkit-bringing-more-play-into-the-school-day.pdf> (Accessed 29th January 2022).

Curriculum for Wales. (2022) *Assessment: revised guidance; more resources on the way*. [Blog] Available at: <https://curriculumforwales.gov.wales/2022/01/27/assessment-revised-guidance-more-resources-on-the-way> (Accessed 15th February 2022).

Garrick, R. (2009) *Playing Outdoors in the Early Years*. 2nd ed Hampshire: Ashford Colour Press Ltd.

Howard, J. and McInnes, K. (2013) 'The impact of children's perception of an activity as play rather than not play on emotional well-being', *Child: care, health & development*, vol 39, issue (5), pp. 737–742. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2214.2012.01405.x.

McInnes, K, Howard J, Miles G and Crowley, K. (2011) *Differences in practitioners' understanding of play and how this influences pedagogy and children's perceptions of play*, *Early Years*, 31:2, 121-133, DOI: 10.1080/09575146.2011.572870

Macblain, S. (2014) *How children learn*. London: SAGE.

McInnes,K, Howard,J, Crowley,K & Miles,G. (2013) *The nature of adult–child interaction in the early years classroom: Implications for children's perceptions of play and subsequent learning behaviour*, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 21:2, 268-282, DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2013.789194

Moyles, J. (2013) 'Play and Early Years: Birth to Seven Years' Available at: [http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEET S/play%20and%20early%20years.pdf](http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEET%20S/play%20and%20early%20years.pdf) (Accessed 7th February 2022).

Play Wales Chwarae Cymru. (2017) *Play types*. Available at: www.playwales.org.uk (Accessed 3rd February 2022).

Sharman, C, Cross, W and Vennis, D. (2000) *Observing Children: A Practical Guide*. Avon: The Bath Press.

The Early Years Foundation Stage. (2007) *Effective Practice: Play and Exploration*. Available at: http://www.keap.org.uk/documents/eyfs_ep_play_exploration.pdf (Accessed 2nd February 2022).

Thornton, L and Brunton, P. (2005) *Understanding the Reggio Approach*. London: David Fulton

Welsh Government. (2014) *Wales – A Play Friendly Country* Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-07/wales-a-play-friendly-country.pdf> (Accessed 19th January 2022).

Welsh Government. (2017) *Foundation Phase Profile Handbook*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/storage/f9d85dba-85a4-4e87-bb58-a24730ad7e57/foundation-phase-profile-handbook-revised-september-2017.pdf> (Accessed 8th February 2022).

Welsh Government. (2022) *Implementation and practical considerations. Designing your curriculum*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/designing-your-curriculum/implementation-and-practical-considerations>. (Accessed 15th February 2022).