

Cover sheet

For this assignment I have submitted the following

1. Types of play
2. Child-led play
3. Observation
4. Observation and play

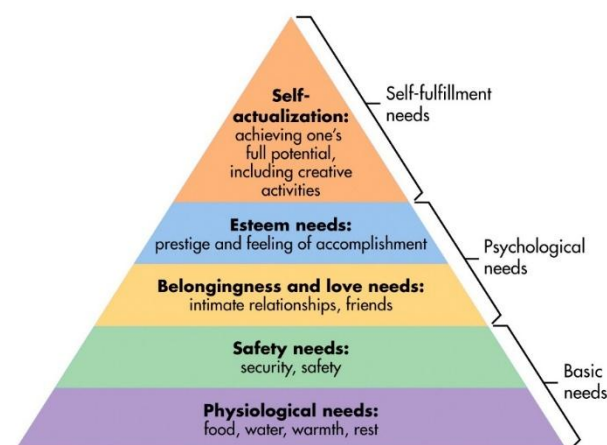
I confirm that I have not used AI during this assignment.

I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes and other resources I have used which I may be asked to provide as evidence.

Section one - Types of play

Howard argues that “more than ever before, making time and space for play should be priorities” (Howard, 2020). She could be emphasising that play is not optional but essential for children’s health and development. From the research she has made over several years, including the views and voices of children, Howard suggests that the value of play is now better understood than ever before, therefore, it should be prioritised within early years practise (Howard, 2020). This could imply that practitioners have a responsibility to provide children with dedicated time and an appropriate space to promote play, where play is viewed as a key role of holistic development.

Messy play is one example of how play can support holistic development. Duffy (2007) suggests that messy play allows children to explore a various possibilities, which taps into the children’s curiosity about the world around them (Duffy, 2007). Giving children the sense of freedom to explore their environment could contribute to children’s self-esteem and self of belonging, especially if they are playing with their peers. Building children’s self-esteem should build towards their hierarchy of needs.



(Comberg, 2011)

However, as shown on the image above, according to Maslow, children would need to have their physiological and safety needs met before they could fully engage in play that would develop their sense of belonging (Simons *et al.*, 1987). This highlights that children’s basic needs must be prioritised, along with play.

Practitioners should acknowledge the fact that if children are hungry, tired, or thirsty, they may not want to engage in messy play, as they may not feel confident or comfortable enough if their psychological needs are not met. According to Perry

(2016), creating a safe, engaging environment should therefore be essential in enabling children to participate fully in experiences (Perry, 2016).

Messy play may look different to children of different developmental stages and ages, therefore, practitioners should consider adapting the play opportunity to meet the children's age appropriately. For example, from birth to twelve months, infants are likely to explore primarily through their senses, so they may explore different textures with their hands and feet, enjoying simple materials (Gascoyne, 2018). Similarly, role-play develops progressively as children grow. For example, from birth to eighteen months, children may start through imitation. This could be copying how someone uses a hairbrush or stirring with a spoon (Woodhouse, 2019).

Pestalozzi's theory of 'head, heart, and hands' promotes the value of both messy play and role play in promoting holistic development. Pestalozzi believed that education should develop a whole child (Sellars and Imig, 2021). He also believed that children learn through doing, and messy play is a key example of how children can learn through play by problem-solving, making mistakes, and thinking for themselves (Sellars and Imig, 2021). Children will use their heads through thinking and problem-solving and experimenting with cause and effect. They could do this while playing in the water or mixing paint colours (Uher and Rushton, 2022). Children use their hearts through messy play, as it should be joyful and freeing, which should support their confidence, curiosity, and sense of belonging (Uher and Rushton, 2022). Finally, children use their hands to explore messy play, exploring a range of textures which is significant for some children who rely on different sensory experiences to regulate their emotions. (Uher and Rushton, 2022).

Similarly, role-play provides opportunities for children to develop imagination, language, social understanding and emotional skills (Woodhouse, 2019). Role play can be anything a child wants it to be, from a home corner, fancy dress, occupational role-play, or small world play, allowing children to explore different roles and scenarios (Woodhouse, 2019). Messy play and role play can both have a focus, such as the focus on the material, water, sand, or paint, or a certain character or scenario. Having a focused task may give the children the depth and concentration to explore the specific task, therefore they would be getting the most out of the task

(Gascoyne, 2018). These opportunities are essential for children to develop holistically. Similarly to messy play, role play children will also align with Pestalozzi's theory of 'head, heart, and hands' as children think and plan scenarios, build empathy and relationships, being active and engaging with real life materials (Uher and Rushton, 2022). According to Fler (2014), through role-play, children are able to explore real life situations in a meaningful way. However, Montessori argued that role-play promotes fantasy and believed that children learn best through real, purposeful activities, rather than pretend scenarios (Sawyers *et al.*, 2021). For example, Montessori suggests that children should cook rather than role play cooking.

Although messy play and role play both seem to contribute significantly to holistic development, they support different aspects of learning. Messy play primarily promotes sensory exploration, motor development and emotional regulation, whereas role play supports imagination, social skills and empathy. Together, both areas of play provide opportunities that support children's holistic development.

Section two – self-directed play

Self-directed play enables children to take control of their play, without direct instructions or directions from adults, allowing them to determine the ideas, rules, pace and overall process of their play (Aminpour *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, self-directed play could support children's memory, planning and problem-solving as children connect past situations to their play and plan accordingly to adapt the play if needed (Aminpour *et al.*, 2020). Through self-directed play, children are building skills that are essential later in life, such as resilience and self-trust (Fiechtner and Albrecht, 2019). Furthermore, if children feel as though they are in a safe space, self-directed play may also give children an opportunity to express big emotions, as there are no limitations to the play. Children may also learn to trust themselves through self-directed play as they discover that their own ideas are successful and meaningful (Fiechtner and Albrecht, 2019).

In addition, self-directed play allows children the freedom to choose what they want to play with and how. By allowing children the choice, it may result in higher levels of engagement and deep learning, as the play would have come from the children's ideas, therefore the learning is more likely to be embedded as the children would be engaged in the play (Robinson, 2022, p. 6). This highlights the importance of self-directed play, as excessive adult involvement may reduce the depth of children's engagement.

Friedrick Froebel's 'freedom with guidance' theory highlights the importance of self-directed play, emphasising the importance of how to help children think independently, problem-solve, make choices, and follow their own interests (Froebel Trust, 2022). However, Froebel also acknowledged that adult guidance plays a key role in helping children achieve this freedom (Froebel Trust, 2022). Froebel's theory implies that adults can play a role in self-directed play by preparing the environment and use of appropriate resources before stepping back during the play to enable the children to lead and choose their play independently.

In contrast, John Bowlby highlighted the importance of emotional security and attachments in children's development, suggesting that children flourish when they feel safe and supported by a trusted adult (White, 2018). This implies that some children may need an adult nearby to support their engagement in self-directed play,

as without a sense of security, children may struggle to explore their environment freely and confidently.

Muryanti and Hartati (2019, p. 298) state the importance of children choosing their own play whilst also emphasising that adult intervention should be minimised. This could mean adults only stepping in when necessary, such as when emotions escalate. Self-directed play could also develop a child's self-trust and independence, as the child will need to observe the play situation before joining in, encouraging the child to think for themselves and make their own decisions (Muryanti and Hartati, 2019, p. 298).

Lester and Russel believed that an adult's role in supporting self-directed play is to provide an engrossed environment where children feel encouraged to play (Lester and Russel, 2010). Adults could create an engaging and safe environment by following the child's lead and creating a space where children feel safe and confident to explore. However, having an adult nearby may encourage children to take bigger risks as they know that there is someone close to them if something goes wrong. John Bowlby believed that children are biologically wired to seek comfort from their trusted adult, so they may need an adult close to them as they play (White, 2018). He believed that when the child's attachment needs are met, they will feel safe to play and explore freely (White, 2018). Therefore, some children may struggle to feel comfortable to play and explore their environment if their trusted adult is not nearby. Through self-directed play, children will be encouraged to problem-solve and think for themselves, which may support their independence (Zosh *et al.*, 2022, p. 10). However, an adult may need to intervene if the emotions get too strong and if the play escalates or if a child may need help to regulate their emotions. Instead of directing the play, adults should instead consider taking a step back and observe the play, stepping in only if necessary. However, if a child feels as though they are being observed or watched by an adult, this may change the child's play, and they may be less engaged or look to the adult for guidance or support in their play, therefore diminishing the self-directed play (Kabadayl and Dasdemir, 2024). To prevent this, adults should only observe children for a short amount of time to avoid disrupting their play or, equally, observe from a distance so the child feels comfortable to participate fully in their play.

In addition, self-directed play may develop a child's self-esteem as children are encouraged to make their own choices, overcome challenges, and use their own ideas. This aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, which suggests that esteem needs will only be reached once the physiological and safety needs are met (Simons *et al.*, 1987). Therefore, practitioners must ensure children feel safe and secure in the environment in order for self-directed play to take place and promote children's holistic development.

Section three – observation

Mary and Debbie explain observation as a way of truly valuing and hearing children's views and ideas (Fawcett and Watson, 2016, p. 14). They state that observing children is far deeper than watching what is happening, and it allows us to learn about the child (Fawcett and Watson, 2016, p. 14). Similarly, Butler (2025) states that observation refers to the process of giving full attention and focus to the child to learn about the child. He further explains observation as a holistic approach and a stepping stone to fully understanding a child. That observation is an effective way to let the child teach themselves about you. He states that practitioners may sometimes have a presumptive view on a child and how they may act during a certain situation. Observation should allow practitioners to get rid of their presumption of a child and watch the child to understand them properly (Borich, 2016, p. 2). All three authors understand the importance of observation, but they all seem to have a different emphasis of its purpose. Fawcett and Watson (2016) view observation as a way of valuing children's voices, with emphasis on how observation enables practitioners to truly hear and respect children's views and ideas. Fawcett and Watson (2016) imply that observation is a method of listening and understanding a child as opposed to recording their behaviour. Similarly, Butler (2025) also emphasises observation as a method to give full attention and focus to a child. In agreement with Fawcett and Watson (2016), Butler (2025) understands the importance of giving undivided attention to a child whilst observing, as both authors believe that observation is different to watching. However, Butler (2025) views observation as a learning process, as by using stepping stones he may be implying that observation is a way to develop a child's learning. In contrast, Borich (2016) focuses more on how observation benefits the practitioner instead of the child. Whilst the other two authors state that observation helps practitioners understand and listen to children, Borich (2016) states that observation may be used to remove the presumptive view practitioners may have on children.

Mcrae and Jones (2020) explain the Leuven scale method as an observation scale used from the ages of 1-5 to allow practitioners to quantify a child's involvement in self-chosen play. The scale starts at 1, which would be the least involvement, and works up to 5, which would be a child displaying the most involvement (Mcrae and Jones, 2020). This method could be useful, as how involved a child is in their play or

an activity concludes the child's learning experience, therefore, learning about children individually is vital to adapt activities for each child to gain an engrossed learning experience. The Leuven scale method focuses on three methods, the movement tracker, interaction tracker and running record.

The movement tracker is a systematic observation method that focuses on how much children move, the type of quality of their movement and how the movement links to engagement, exploration, and learning (Macrae and Jones, 2020). This method is used to help understand children's movement patterns, it can also help practitioners identify children who may be restricted, passive or overcontrolled (Macrae and Jones, 2020). Practitioners could use what they've observed using this method to improve the learning environment to develop the children's physical experiences. The interactive tracker is used to observe the quality of a child's interactions in an environment (Macrae and Jones, 2020). This method focuses on how adults, a child's peers and the environment interact with a child and how these interactions affect the child's well-being and involvement (Macrae and Jones, 2020). The aim of this method is to observe whether a child's interactions support deep learning, emotional security and engagement (Macrae and Jones, 2020). These two methods can be used over time, and practitioners could reflect after the scenario has happened to note what the child has done. However, the third Leuven scale observation method is a running record. This method focuses on real time, capturing exactly what a child did and said over a brief period (Macrae and Jones, 2020). This method could be useful to see a behaviour pattern in a child and ensure there is no bias in the observation as it is a real-time observation (Macrae and Jones, 2020). This method could also be used to deeply understand how an environment and interactions can affect the child. To conclude, the Leuven scale observation method could be beneficial as it focuses on the child's experience, therefore developing the child holistically as the method observes all areas of the child.

However, MacRae and Jones (2020) argue that if practitioners are solely focused on putting children on the scale of 1-5 of involvement, they may lose or disregard other accomplishments of the children's play. This is a limitation, as useful observation information could be lost or go unnoticed.

Section four – observation in play

Children use play as a means of communication to tell stories and express themselves (Smidt, 2015, p. 3). Observing children through play therefore allows practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of the child, as play provides an opportunity in which children can express themselves freely. Smidt (2015) further explains the importance of observing during play, as play is when children will follow their interests and passions, making it a valuable opportunity for practitioners to understand each child individually. In addition, observing through play could allow the practitioners to assess a child's social, cognitive or language and literacy skills effectively, as the child should not feel as though they are being assessed if they are engaged in play-based activities. However, if a child does notice a practitioner watching and observing them, they may change their behaviour, disengage from the activity or act differently. To avoid this, practitioners could take a step back and observe from a distance to avoid diminishing the play in place or engage with the play in a non-intrusive way.

Observing children through play also supports the identification of any schemas, as children may be more likely to repeat behaviours and patterns when they feel comfortable and in control of their play (Smidt, 2015, p. 2). Recognising schemas and behaviour patterns could help practitioners understand the child, enabling them to identify a child's developmental stage and arrange appropriate support for the child if necessary.

The importance of observing through play is further supported by Lev Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (Ness, 2022). According to Ness (2022), Vygotsky viewed play as a key type of development, as children develop their creativity, learn to take on different roles and combine previous knowledge with new experiences to develop deeper understanding. This could imply that if a practitioner observed a child through play, they may discover that a child's development stage or behaviour pattern may be impacted by their personal life experiences. Following this method, a practitioner may also be able to observe what a child can do independently and in which developmental areas they may need additional support from an adult. Observing through play could be a helpful way of providing a child with

early intervention, if necessary, as practitioners could observe an area of development in which a child may benefit from support.

Similarly, Bruner's concept of scaffolding highlights the importance of observing through play (Rajapashka, 2016). Bruner used the term 'scaffolding' to describe an adult's contribution to children's development and learning through supporting the child to complete tasks within their zone of proximal development (Rajapashka, 2016). This highlights the importance of observing through play, as, if practitioners do not observe children through play, they may struggle to understand their developmental level, therefore, making it difficult to provide the right support.

Howard and McInnes (2013) argue that play is the best way to observe children, as if a child views an activity as play, they will be more likely to understand it and want to participate. Increased engagement allows practitioners to observe children more accurately, gaining insight into the child's abilities, interests and developmental progress (Howard and McInnes, 2013).

To ensure child-led play, adults should take a step back and observe whilst play is happening to avoid interrupting the play but also be aware of when and how the child may need them (Veraska *et al.*, 2025). The role of the adult is to ensure a trusting relationship with the children, so they feel safe to explore and take risks but also know that there is support if they need it (Veraska *et al.*, 2025). Furthermore, to challenge the children's play, practitioners should provide a stimulating environment, suitable for the children's abilities. An environment like this could promote the children's development in all areas, and with the positive relationship they should have with their trusted adult, a child should feel confident to challenge themselves. If a child is in a stimulating environment and able to challenge themselves, this allows for the opportunity for the practitioner to observe what the child is capable of, meaning practitioners can then plan activities based on what they have observed, following the child-led approach (Colliver *et al.*, 2020).

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