

Cover sheet

For this assessment I have submitted a portfolio containing the following:

- Section 1- Types of play
- Section 2- Child-led play
- Section 3- Observation
- Section 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.

Portfolio**Types of play**

Role play is a type of play that supports a child's language, social, and emotional development by allowing them to engage in imaginary situations and imitate familiar behaviours. Nihazram and Masnan (2020) emphasise that role play encourages the use of natural language through interaction and create their own scenarios whilst engaging with others, increasing their motivation for learning. In early years settings, effective role-play activities may require planning and adult support, with practitioners designing activities based on real-life experiences such as home life, school, or shops (Nihazram and Masnan, 2020). Ongoing observation and reflection enable practitioners to evaluate children's engagement and adapt provision to effectively meet their developmental needs, suggesting that well-supported role play can enhance learning opportunities (McNair, Cameron, and Gilbertson, 2019). However, some children might find role-play overwhelming and challenging, for example, children from different cultural backgrounds may imitate different behaviours as that is what they are familiar with. Also, children with developmental needs may struggle with this type of play as it can become overstimulating for them, meaning that the support from a practitioner must remain appropriately balanced while still remaining child led (University of Cambridge, 2022).

Shah, Abdullah, and Ali (2024) believe that role play supports holistic development, by allowing children to explore their environment, develop communication skills and build relationships, suggesting that development happens effectively when all areas are connected. Activities, such as construction games, storytelling and imaginative play, enhance a child's thinking, language, and emotional skills (Shah, Abdullah and Ali, 2024). This article also outlines the developmental stages of play and how they develop through role play, starting with inactive and solitary play where the child begins to explore movements and objects independently, such as talking on a toy phone. Followed by parallel and observer play, where children will watch and play alongside others without direct interaction. As the child reaches associative and social play, children begin sharing their ideas, creating scenarios together, while cooperative play

involves following rules and participating in advanced role play scenarios (Shah, Abdullah and Ali, 2024).

Role play links to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, as he believed that children develop skills through social interaction and shared experiences within the zone of proximal development. The child is then able to improve their abilities with the correct support from adults (McLeod, 2025). Through role play, children communicate, problem solve, work as part of a team, regulate their emotions and interact with others, supporting their cognitive, social, emotional and language development (Kaizar and Alordiah, 2023). Therefore, role play connects to Vygotsky's theory that learning through play experiences can help children progress within their development.

Sensory play gives children the opportunity to explore and learn through their senses using materials such as sand, water, sounds, or smells, which supports a child's problem-solving skills, brain development, and motor skills (Gascoyne, 2016). During these activities, practitioners can observe the child and discover their interests and how they can link to their developmental stages, and then use this information to support learning, which helps with a child's development and learning outcomes (Patimah and Nurhayati, 2023). In contrast, role play focuses more on imagination and interaction, whereas sensory play focuses on exploration and engagement with materials. However, they both support holistic development and provide meaningful learning experiences, highlighting the importance of providing a balanced range of play (Gascoyne, 2016).

According to Gilleard *et al.* (2025), holistic development can be linked to sensory play, as it contributes to a child's wellbeing, emotional development, and familiarity with their environment. Sensory play benefits multiple areas of development rather than just one, leading to positive impacts on their relationships, wellbeing and emotional understanding, and highlighting its importance in early years (Gilleard *et al.*, 2025). Similarly, role play supports holistic development through social interaction, emotional regulation, and engagement across all areas of development. However, while sensory play has a significant impact during a child's early stages, role play provides more opportunities throughout the child's life with advanced social communication and balanced play experiences (Latha *et al.*, 2025).

During early stages of play, including inactive and solitary play, sensory play supports children as they begin to explore movements and investigate objects (Shah, Abdullah, and Ali, 2024). During observer and parallel play, these activities with other children can develop language skills and social awareness. Progressing to associate and social play, children will interact more by communicating, sharing materials, and working as a team, while cooperative play introduces rules to support development and progress to more meaningful experiences (Shah, Abdullah and Ali, 2024). Equally, role play progresses in the same way through these stages, as the children become more social, communicative and imaginative. Sensory play is also linked to Piaget's cognitive development theory, concentrating on the sensorimotor stage, which argued that children develop and learn through their senses, rather than instruction (McLeod, 2025). Activities including textures, materials and objects allow the child to experiment, understand cause and effect and develop their problem solving and thinking skills, reflecting Piaget's theory that early learning happens through sensory experiences (Tamblyn *et al.*, 2023).

Child-led play

Self-directed play refers to a type of play that is shaped by the child themselves rather than being shaped by adults and rules, allowing children to make their own choices, follow their interests and use their imagination and exploration skills (Stone, 2016). This type of play supports a child's independence, confidence and decision-making skills, whilst also supporting their problem-solving and creativity skills and social development. Supporting holistic development and providing meaningful learning experiences for children (Stone, 2016).

Self-directed play can be understood as the type of play that children take full control over and make their own, allowing them to follow their interests. Through this type of play, children will begin to develop an understanding of their surrounding environment by exploring, making free choices and responding to any challenges they are faced with (Aminpour, Bishop and Corkery, 2019). In early years settings, self-directed play usually includes open-ended activities, such as construction, role play, and sensory activities.

This highlights that meaningful learning experiences do not need to have adult direction or set rules, and children can provide themselves with their own meaningful experiences that develop their concentration, creativity and independence (Aminpour, Bishop and Corkery, 2019). This type of play can link to Piaget's cognitive development theory, as he believed that children learn through exploration and engagement with their environment (McLeod, 2025a). As well as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which highlighted the importance of interaction and shared experiences in early years (McLeod, 2025b). Overall, self-directed play creates a child-centred environment allowing children to guide their own curiosity and engagement.

According to Wolfenden *et al.* (2019), self-directed play is important, as it gives children the freedom to choose their own way of playing, meaning they are more likely to engage and create meaningful learning experiences for themselves. When children create activities based on their own interests, it gives them more motivation and concentration, which supports deeper learning opportunities (Wolfenden *et al.*, 2019). This then allows learning experiences to come naturally through their activities, rather than having instructions set out from an adult, which overall supports their cognitive, social, emotional, and language development. Self-directed play can also encourage independence, confidence, and resilience as the child will make their own decisions, solve their own problems, and overcome any challenges they are faced with (Wolfenden *et al.*, 2019). However, Davies, and Souter (2023) suggest that complete freedom may limit opportunities when children are developing their thinking skills. This highlights the importance of a balanced approach, where children can make their own choices in play but with the support from adults when needed. Overall, self-directed play supports a child's holistic development and encourages engagement during learning experiences, which supports their future learning (Haywood, Davies, and Souter, 2023).

Adults can support self-directed play in many ways, such as creating an enabling environment, observing, and providing appropriate support, when necessary, rather than controlling the play activity. During these experiences, practitioners should allow children to determine the meaning and direction of their play and observe and reflect whilst the activity is taking place (Brown, Harry, and Mahoney, 2018). Observation and

reflection can be effective methods for gathering information on the children's likes and dislikes, discovering what resources they are engaging with the most and how they are creating meaningful learning experiences for themselves. However, during this time, children may become aware they are being observed and change their behaviour to how they think the practitioner would want them to behave (Bianquin, 2018). This may also mean the child is disengaged from the activity, or they could look to the adult for support because they know they are there observing them, leading to less accurate results. Practitioners can provide further support to children during these activities by providing open-ended resources, which will encourage them to use their creativity and imagination skills to create their own unique activity, rather than providing the children with a specific outcome (Bianquin, 2018). Practitioners could also introduce open-ended questions to the children and provide positive comments to help develop the child's thinking skills whilst keeping the activity child led. Ultimately, maintaining a safe, inclusive, and secure environment enables children to take risks, voice their opinions and ideas freely, and develop their confidence and decision-making skills. Therefore, while self-directed play allows children to become independent and make their own decisions, without balanced and appropriate support from the practitioner, the child's learning opportunities may be limited. Whilst still remaining child-led, practitioners can notice what the child is doing and how they can move forward in their development, meaning an opportunity for learning will not be missed (Bianquin, 2018).

Observation

Observation can be understood from an assessment viewpoint in early years, as practitioners watch, record, and reflect on children's behaviour, play, and interactions to gain information on their development. This allows practitioners to document progress, strengths, and areas for support to inform future planning within a natural learning environment (Thornton-Lang, 2012). From a planning viewpoint, observation enables practitioners to gather evidence about children's needs and interests to create appropriate next steps and learning experiences (Kent County Council, 2026). Observation is at the centre of provision in many settings, as it informs activities that

support development across all areas and shape the environment to meet individual needs (Kent County Council, 2026). It also provides an understanding of the child's wellbeing, relationships, emotions, and any needs they have, allowing practitioners to identify concerns, recognise behavioural patterns, and provide early intervention when needed (Pernebo, Anderberg, and Massoudi, 2025). Together, these perspectives support assessments, planning, and understanding of the child in early years.

The Leuven scale individual child observation was developed by Ferre Laevers at KU Leuven and is used in early years to assess children's well-being and involvement on a 1-5 scale, which supports improved learning outcomes for the child by responding to their needs (Whybrow, Williams and Htaik, 2025). It allows practitioners to notice, analyse and respond appropriately by using movement trackers, interaction trackers, and running records to gather detailed information about individual children (Whybrow, Williams, and Htaik, 2025).

The movement tracker records what areas the child uses within the setting over time, focusing on physical engagement by tracking the areas visited, time spent in each area, movement patterns, and levels of engagement. It is used to identify which areas attract the child, understand independence and exploration, and evaluate whether the areas support deep involvement, allowing practitioners to improve the areas to better meet the children's interests (MacRae and Jones, 2020). The interaction tracker records how and who the child interacts with, focusing on social behaviour, and tracks how often they interact with individuals, adult interaction, quality of the interaction, and how the interaction started. This method is used to assess the child's social skills and any patterns in friendship or isolation and evaluate emotional well-being, allowing the practitioner to provide any support needed (MacRae and Jones, 2020). The running record is used to record the exact words a child has spoken, specific actions, and any sequence of events in real time, allowing practitioners to analyse behaviour, assess involvement, understand their thinking, and inform planning (MacRae and Jones, 2020). Together, these methods build a full picture of a child's emotional security, engagement, and learning quality, allowing practitioners to support development effectively (MacRae and Jones, 2020).

The Leuven scale has many benefits in early years practice. It focuses on deep learning, as it measures children's involvement, which reflects their concentration, motivation, and persistence (Main, 2021). It promotes a child-centred approach by prioritising a child's well-being and recognising that they learn most effectively when they feel emotionally secure, confident, and valued. It is also easy for practitioners to follow and support reflective practice, as it encourages them to question the child's involvement and how the environment can be adapted and if the child requires any support (Main, 2021). It can support early intervention, as low scoring may indicate unmet needs, allowing for early support. However, the Leuven scale also has some limitations. The scoring may vary between practitioners, which could affect reliability, and this could be down to practitioners not having enough training or experience (Brodie, 2025). During this observation, it only focuses on behaviour at a specific moment, meaning a child's involvement can depend on tiredness, mood, and the environment. It also does not assess a child's specific developmental milestones, such as fine motor or language skills, and across different cultures the well-being and involvement of a child could be interpreted differently, meaning different scoring (Brodie, 2025). Therefore, while the Leuven scale focuses on a child-centred approach when understanding their emotional well-being and engagement, it is most effective when used alongside other observation tools to ensure a full understanding of the child.

The Leuven scale observation supports holistic development indirectly, rather than focusing on the developmental areas individually. Because its focus is a child's well-being and involvement, which comes under all developmental areas (FSF Rebecca and Evans, 2018). As these are measured on a scale, practitioners can understand a child's whole experience, and its main strength is that it remains child-centred whilst focusing on their learning journey. However, it does not focus on specific developmental milestones such as fine motor, language or cognitive skills, so therefore does not provide a full holistic developmental assessment, which means that to gain an overall understanding of the child, this observation tool must be used alongside others (FSF Rebecca and Evans, 2018).

Observation and play

When observing and assessing children, play allows practitioners to understand children in an informal environment, which allows them to feel relaxed during this time and show real emotion, use natural behaviour and language and interact freely with others (Fawcett and Watson, 2016). Children are more likely to feel safe during play, which allows them to become more engaged in the activity, leading to more accurate assessment results. This also means that practitioners can identify a child's strengths and any areas where they may need additional support, such as developmental delays, communication difficulties or sensory needs (Fawcett and Watson, 2016). During this time, it also provides a holistic assessment by promoting cognitive development through problem-solving, language development through vocabulary, social development through cooperation, emotional development through self-regulation and physical development through gross and fine motor skills (Fawcett and Watson, 2016). However, if a child notices they are being observed, they may change how they are behaving, resulting in the Hawthorne effect, which leads to inaccurate results. Also, practitioners are only observing the child for a limited time, which may not show a full picture of the child's development (Al-Hendawi, Hussein and Darwish, 2025).

When observing children, play can give a more accurate reflection of their developmental stage due to them behaving naturally, which shows practitioners their genuine abilities within meaningful activities. Howard and McInnes (2013) found that when children viewed an activity as play rather than work, they showed higher levels of emotional well-being and motivation. This suggests that play-based activities influence a child's engagement, meaning that these activities provide a more authentic reflection of their development (Howard and McInnes, 2013). Supporting this, Play Wales (2026) highlights that play during the first 1000 days is important for a child's brain development as it strengthens connections being made for their cognitive, emotional and social development. Furthermore, Einstein (cited in Pascual and Srinivas, 2023) stated "Play is the highest form of research," which suggests that play enables the child to explore, problem-solve, and think creatively, allowing them to show deeper levels of understanding. Together, this supports the idea that play is a key indicator of where a

child is developmentally. However, although play can support a child's development, it may not always show a full picture, as their confidence levels and play preferences could not show all their abilities within these scenarios (O'Keeffe and McNally, 2025).

Adults can support a child's play in many ways, such as standing back and observing, which allows children their own space to create their own activity, and during this time they can understand what the children are learning, exploring, and notice their interests (Vasilopoulos *et al.*, 2026). By doing this it gives children the freedom to explore and encourages children to take risks, be independent and use their decision-making skills. Practitioners can support a child's play by having good knowledge of child development, as this allows them to understand age-appropriate behaviours, recognise the stages of development and step in if needed for any safety issues or to resolve conflict (McLean *et al.*, 2022). By knowing the child well, practitioners are aware of their likes and interests, allowing them to create an enabling environment for them to play. Through this they can ensure the environment is safe and provide open-ended resources that reflect the child's current interests, enabling the child to extend their thinking and use the resources in unconventional ways (McLean *et al.*, 2022). However, practitioners may unintentionally disrupt a child's play by taking over and trying to control, turning the play into a lesson, correcting any 'mistakes' the children make and focusing more on the outcome rather than the process. By doing this, it can reduce creativity and imagination and make the practitioner in charge of their play rather than the child (Duss *et al.*, 2025).

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