

The theory of play

- **In small groups, consider:**
- **What is play?**
- **Why do children play?**
- **Do all children play?**
- **Do children need to learn to play?**
- **How would you define ‘quality play’?**
- **Write short notes to discuss with other groups.**

Play is:

- **Central to children's learning**
- **An integral part of children's development and learning**
- **A purposeful experience**
- **The right of all children**

There have been two main influences on the theory of play.

- Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) & Maria Montessori (1870-1952) Their thoughts and approaches are quite different.

Froebel favoured the child centred approach and many of his ideas are what we now know as free flow play. He believed children needed real experiences and to be physically active . There was a link between play and learning. Action songs and rhymes were introduced and seen as stimulation to further development. He saw the importance of outdoor play and natural materials in the environment. He founded the first kindergarten and has significant influence on later theorists.

Montessori, in contrast

- **believed children needed structured learning opportunities**
- **the involvement and interest of adults is important to play**
- **saw the adult as a facilitator in learning**
- **did not see the value of play which did not have a focus on learning**
- However, like Piaget, she saw children as active in their own learning. Many nurseries in Europe follow the Montessori model.

Early theorists were influenced by Froebel & Montessori

Susan Isaacs(1885-1948) was influenced by Froebel and others. She saw the value of play as a means to enable children the freedom to balance their ideas, feelings and relationships whilst moving in and out of reality through play. She saw the importance of fantasy play. All play was seen as vital to holistic development. Isaacs also believed that parents were the child's first educators

Margaret McMillan(1860-1931) again saw the importance of active learning. She saw play as a means of expression and application of knowledge and understanding. She was a main pioneer in nursery education which emphasised the importance of nutrition and medical services as well as physical and emotional well being.

Sigmund Freud

- **Freud** saw play as a means of releasing painful memories and feelings. Revisit Freud's theory of personality development to relate the psychoanalytical perspective to play.
- Freud's ideas have influenced the development of play therapy which is also a very interesting area of research.

Piaget's cognitive theory of the development of play through stages sees children involved in characteristic play behaviours at certain stages-

e.g. 0-18 months, sensory motor, 18 month-5 years symbolic representation, 5 years - 8 years co-operative play, games with rules.

Both Piaget and Vygotsky believed that play turns into games about 8 years of age. Play does, however, have different meanings to children of differing ages.

Play develops with the child from babyhood to the more elaborate play in which the child 5-8 engages. Props, rules, narrative and more sophisticated skills are involved.

Play is still beneficial to adults for its opportunities for creativity and more imaginative, extended thinking processes.

Tina Bruce

- argues that play comes from within and does not progress through a sequence or hierarchy.
- according to Bruce, free flow play is a vital part of learning and experience.
- Bruce believes that through play, children 'wallow in ideas, feelings and relationships' and 'become technically proficient' through play.
- In order to determine exactly what constitutes quality play Tina Bruce has identified twelve aspects which can be used to assess play provision.

Kathy Sylva

- Studied young children and the way in which they played and used resources. She saw problem solving skills used and developed through play.
- Sylva sees two types of play:
 - **free flow**
 - **structured**

Following from Piaget's theory she saw the need for adult observation of play followed by appropriate adult intervention to enrich play

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Other theorists who have extended Piaget's work are

- **Cathy Nutbrown and Chris Athey** who saw play as an integral part of the curriculum. Again we can research their influence on current thinking in curriculum planning and development.
- **Athey** also focused on the development of **schemas** in children's play and development.

Theories of play in later childhood, theories of playwork, have been structured more recently by several evolving theorists, including **Jennie Lindon, Bob Hughes, Stuart Lester, Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else.**

They look more closely at the processes of play and where children's play is **facilitated by adults** without unnecessary involvement in the play itself.

Opportunities for play are provided, play is freely chosen by the child.

The relationship between play and brain development is now more widely recognised and researched.