

► How play is structured in early years settings to promote development

Introduction

Have you ever seen children take part in a treasure hunt? A treasure hunt encourages children's physical activity, but it is also fun. It is an example of the way that play can be structured by adults. If you are in placement or can visit a nursery, make a list of what is on offer for children. How many opportunities are organised or structured by adults?

Key terms

Adult-led play – play opportunities and activities which are organised and led by an adult.

Adult-initiated play – play opportunities set up by adults for children to discover.

Child-initiated play – play in which children choose what and how to play and who to play with.

Vocabulary – words and what they mean.

We have seen that there are several different types of play opportunities that early years settings can offer. The way these are presented and organised can be varied too. There are three key ways in which play can be structured and organised: **adult-led play**, **adult-initiated play** and **child-initiated play**.



Figure 2.4 There are different ways of structuring play.

Early years settings include all three ways of structuring play because it is thought that all of them can contribute to children's development. As we will see in this section, each type of structure has its advantages and disadvantages.

Curriculum requirements

Many settings in the UK are required to show that they provide a mixture of adult-led, adult-initiated and child-initiated play. This is because they are following curriculum frameworks. In England there is a legal requirement for settings to provide a balance of adult-led, adult-initiated and child-initiated play.

► Adult-led play

This is the type of play where the adult plans, organises and shows or tells the children what they need to do. Examples of adult-led play include playing picture lotto or a musical game such as 'Hokey Cokey'. The adult tells children what to do and how to play. Adults might also do some cooking or gardening with children. With babies, adult-led play is very important. Adults might play peek-a-boo or stack up some beakers for the child to knock down.

Benefits of adult-led play

There are many reasons why early years settings provide adult-led play.

- **Allows higher-risk activities.** Adult-led play allows children to carry out activities that otherwise they would not be able to manage by themselves. A good example of this would be cooking or some types of art and crafts where equipment such as knives or scissors would not be safe for children to use alone. In these types of activities adults also will teach children how to use the equipment.
- **Enables children to learn new skills and concepts.** Adult-led play is also used so that children can learn specific skills and concepts. A good example of this is playing a board game. By playing a board game with an adult, a child might start to recognise numbers on the dice and start to count. If an outing is arranged, children may also learn about things that are new to them. For example, an outing to a zoo or a farm will help them to learn about animals.
- **Helps language development.** Adult-led play also helps children's language development. This is particularly important when children are learning to talk. From making a fruit salad, children might learn the names of fruit and so add this to their **vocabulary**. Adult-led activities with older children can also lead to discussions. By visiting a supermarket and buying ingredients to make a soup, children might talk about favourite foods.



These children can learn simple cooking skills because an adult is with them. What are these children learning about safety in the kitchen?



Potential disadvantages of adult-led play

There are some disadvantages to adult-led play too. This is why adult-led play is not used all the time and why adults have to carefully choose activities that are right for the age and stage of the children.

- **Learning is not always effective.** Disadvantages of adult-led play include the fact that sometimes learning is not very effective. It may be that children have not had enough time to solve problems, practise skills or develop their own ideas. This can be the case when adult-led play is taking place with large groups. Other children might shout out or use the equipment before a child has the chance to get involved. Some children may also lack concentration because they are not interested in the activity.
- **Learning may be limited.** In adult-led play there is also a danger that learning might be limited. If the adult has planned an activity where children are all meant to be making the same card or picture, children will not have the chance to use their own imagination or creativity. There may not be an opportunity for the child to ask questions or to do things their own way. This prevents children from showing their independence.

Case study



The Briars Nursery believes only in adult-led play with children. The adults plan activities for small groups of children. Today the children have been outdoors taking turns using an obstacle course, looking for snails with an adult and also looking at books. Every morning the children count to ten in groups and also do action rhymes. Today one of the children is not joining in the obstacle course. He says that he wants to pretend it is a ship and that he is bored. Another child suggests that it could be a pirate game. The practitioner tells the children to be quiet and to watch the other children instead.

- 1 Why are some of these adult-led activities helpful for the children's development?
- 2 Why might some of these adult-led activities prevent the children from being creative or imaginative?

Key term



Self-serve – being able to choose items without asking permission.

► Child-initiated play

Child-initiated play is sometimes called 'free play'. This is because children are free to choose resources and toys and decide how to play with them. Early years settings encourage this type of play by making it easy for children to help themselves to resources or '**self-serve**'. What children choose to do during child-initiated play varies according to their age and stage of development, but also according to what is available. It is common to see children mix resources, for example, putting grass into a bucket of water and pretending to cook with it or taking dough into a home corner. This means that it is not always a very tidy way of playing! In child-initiated play adults can join in with children, but they have to do what children ask of them.

Benefits of child-initiated play

There are many advantages to child-initiated play. Children's emotional development is particularly supported because children are able to make their own choices. They also gain independence skills as they can help themselves to resources. This type of play helps children to be creative as they have to develop their own ideas of how to play.

- **Concentration.** Many adults notice that children concentrate for quite long periods during child-initiated play. It is not uncommon for 3 and 4 year olds to focus for an hour or so on making models, creating dens or just playing with sensory materials. Children often have a clear purpose and idea of what they are doing and why. Being able to concentrate for long periods is good for children's cognitive development.
- **Social skills.** By playing independently of adults, children have the chance to practise their social skills. They might squabble or raise their voices at times, but most children from 3 years or so are able to work things out themselves. Learning to take turns and cooperate helps children's social skills.



In child-initiated play, children can make their own choices. How can this help them to develop?

Discussion point



Have you seen child-initiated play? How old were the children and what were they doing? How well were the children concentrating?

Potential disadvantages of child-initiated play

There are some disadvantages to only providing child-initiated play opportunities.

- **Limiting development of skills.** Children often have strong play preferences and so may not choose from the whole range of play opportunities. This means that their development may be affected as they will not be gaining a wide range of skills. In some settings not enough equipment or resources are put out and so children's play is repetitive or quite limited.
- **Learning may be limited.** The main disadvantage of child-initiated play is that learning may be limited because children may not want adults to be involved in their play. As we have seen, adults can help children learn concepts such as numbers or problem solving. Adults also help children complete complex tasks such as building a den.

Just checking



- 1 Can you think of three examples of adult-led play?
- 2 Can you think of two examples of the potential benefits of adult-led play?
- 3 What is meant by the term 'adult-initiated play'?
- 4 What is meant by the term 'child-initiated play'?
- 5 Can you think of two examples of child-initiated play?

Assessment activity 2.3

2C.P4 | 2C.M3 | 2C.D3

Gulnaz is 3 years old. She attends a nursery five mornings a week. During each session the nursery provides different types of structured play, but more time is given to child-initiated play. Today Gulnaz has spent some of the session cooking with an adult. She has also played with her friend in the home corner. Gulnaz also occupied herself, looking for shells that had been hidden in a tray of bark chippings.

- 1 Explain how early years settings structure play in different ways to promote children's development and give some examples.
- 2 Discuss the extent to which the way play is structured in this nursery may benefit children's development.
- 3 Assess the impact on Gulnaz's development of this nursery's approach to structuring play.

Tips

- Make sure that you understand the different ways in which play can be structured and the benefits and disadvantages of each approach.
- When discussing the extent to which the play in this nursery may benefit children's development, you need to consider all the different approaches and how they are relevant in this case study. You also need to explain why play is structured in different ways and give examples.
- In order to assess the impact on Gulnaz's development, you need to consider carefully each of the areas of development and decide how they are being promoted by the way this nursery is structuring play. You can use the examples in the case study to help you think about this. Remember also to think about any advantages or disadvantages to this nursery's decision to provide more time for child-initiated play.

Workspace

► Drew Batt

Nursery manager

I work at a brand-new nursery that has been open for a month now. Play is very much at the heart of what we are trying to do here. I am currently interviewing for new staff. When I interview the candidates, I ask questions to see whether or not:

- they understand that children of different ages play in different ways
- they can give examples of play opportunities and activities that they would use with different ages of children
- they understand the different ways in which play can be organised.

As part of the interview, we watch potential staff playing with children and setting up new opportunities. Of course, potential staff also have to know about health and safety and show us that they are caring and friendly, but their understanding of play is crucial. This is because play is the 'bread and butter' of what we do. Children who come here for nine hours of the day will be spending at least seven hours involved in different types of play opportunities. Children need a balanced diet of play which is enjoyable and stimulating, and which helps them develop.



Think about it

- 1 Why would new staff have to know about play in this nursery?
- 2 What have you learned in this unit that would be useful if Drew were to interview you?
- 3 What areas of skills and knowledge do you still need to develop?