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Introduction to Play

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Characteristics of play
- History of play
- Styles and types of play
- Stages of play
- Benefits of play to holistic development

Characteristics of Play

- aving studied both young animals and children at play, Burghardt (1984) identifies a number of characteristics of play:
- It is most common in the young.
- It has no obvious immediate function.
- It is a pleasurable activity.
- It can be quick, using bursts of energy.
- It is spontaneous and voluntary.
- It is relaxed, involving no fear or threat.
- Its sequence may vary.
- It relies on a stimulus to keep going, e.g. one child finds a pinecone on the ground and begins to play with it; another child joins in.
- It may involve developing a mastery of movements, e.g. climbing.

These characteristics highlight how useful and important play is as a tool for learning. Children do not have to be forced or coerced into playing. They do not need to be told to do it because it is good for them; they do not feel fearful or threatened by it. Most of all, children

enjoy play. It makes sense, therefore, that ECEC should be based on learning through play – something children do naturally and spontaneously every day of their lives.

History of Play

Records of children's play date back to earliest times. Archaeological finds from ancient civilizations such as China, Peru and Egypt show drawings of play scenes. Artefacts such as dolls, tops and rattles, usually made from pottery or metal, have also been discovered. Throughout the centuries, anthropologists have studied play in many cultures. Even in the most 'primitive' ones, they have found evidence of storytelling, games and dancing (Mitchell 1937).

Ancient

Plato (c.424-c.347 BC)

The Greek philosopher Plato was a believer in the value of children's play. He urged the Greek state to promote children's games and he offered advice to mothers regarding the promoting play in the home. Plato divided children's development into four levels or stages.

- Infancy (0–3 years) The child should be cared for and protected from fear or pain.
- Nursery (3–6 years) Play and listening to fairytales should be the child's main occupation. Punishments should be infrequent and mild.
- Elementary (6–13 years) Girls and boys should be separated, but both should learn letters, mathematics, music, religion and morals. Boys should receive some military training.
- Middle (13–16 years) Advanced mathematics, poetry and music can be taught. From age 16, boys should receive formal military and gymnastics training.

Plato believed that early experiences were very important because they have a lasting impact on final development. He believed that stories and fables told to young children should be carefully chosen in order to give children clear understanding of the concepts of good and evil. Plato believed that in order for adults to be good at something it is beneficial for them to have 'played' the skill during childhood, e.g. a good builder will have played at building things during childhood. Plato did not advocate children having a huge number of 'toys'. He

proposed that children make their own toys from natural materials or that they be provided with 'tools' to mimic adult roles. Plato wrote a treatise called *The Republic* (*c*.360 BC) in which he proposed his views on public education. This work was highly valued by many later philosophers, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Aristotle (384-322 BC)

Aristotle was another Greek philosopher. He worked with Plato and with Plato's teacher, Socrates. Aristotle valued play and physical exercise, especially during the early years. He believed that formal education should not begin too early, in case growth and physical development would be impeded. Aristotle placed great value on leisure time.

Quintilian (c.35– c.100 AD)

In Ancient Greece, public education was viewed as being in the overall interest of society. In contrast, education in Ancient Rome was very much seen as a private issue: the head of each family was the decision-maker with regards to their children's education. Quintilian was a Roman philosopher who was a firm believer in learning through play in the early years. He believed that children forced into formal learning at too young an age came to 'hate all learning'. He saw the value of observing children. He understood that children have different temperaments and rates of learning, and he believed that these differences should be accommodated. He stated that corporal punishment was degrading and that it simply was not required if educational instruction was good enough.

Medieval

The ideas of ancient philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Quintilian are actually quite modern. In many respects, they align with the teachings of educators such as Froebel and Steiner. However, during the Middle Ages (*c*.5th–15th centuries), beliefs about children and their development and play took a step backwards. During this time, children were expected to move from being dependent infants to 'mini adults' within the space of five or six years. In a sense, childhood ceased to exist. Children of the rich aristocracy practised archery, chess, hunting and school work from four or five years of age. Children of the poor worked as soon as they were physically able to do so. Childhood was not recognised again as a distinct period until the Reformation.

In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist...as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle rocker, he belonged to adult society (Aries 1988).

It must be noted that there is some research that contradicts this view of childhood in the

Middle Ages. Orme (2001) and others have studied writings, records and archaeological finds from the time and they have found evidence of children having their own possessions and play activities.

Reformation and Renaissance

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Martin Luther was an important figure during the Reformation. While he is best-known for his work in the reformation of the church, he also worked towards educational reform. In reflecting on changes in education in his society, he said:

Our schools are no longer a hell and purgatory in which children are tortured over cases and tenses and in which, with much flogging, trembling, anguish and wretchedness, they learn nothing (Painter 1889: 67).

Luther was a careful observer of children, believing that the type of instruction offered to them should be adapted to their nature. He believed that children should be allowed to be active, run, jump and play. Luther believed that children should work hard at school and at home, learn a trade and be permitted to play.

John Amos Comenius (1592–1670)

John Amos Comenius was a Czech theologian who further developed child-centred education, beginning with the idea of the 'mother school'. This was a system of education to be used in the home by mothers of children aged 0–6. Comenius emphasised the importance of children learning through active, firsthand experience. These ideas are very much reflected in the later teachings of educators such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori, Froebel and Piaget. Comenius likened children's development to that of a tree: if a tree is tended to carefully, it will reach maturity covered with fruit waiting to be plucked and used.

John Locke (1632-1704)

John Locke was a physician and philosopher. He was another important figure in childhood education and play. He believed that children should have playthings but should only be allowed to play with one thing at a time. He believed that this would teach children to be careful and respectful of their possessions and that if children were given too much they would become squanderers and wasters! He believed such children would never be happy with what they have and that they would always seek more and more. Locke was a firm believer in children making their own toys, with adults supervising and supporting their endeavours. Locke observed children at play and wrote about his findings.

Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)

Rousseau was one of the most influential philosophers of his time. In 1762, he wrote a hugely influential book entitled *Emile, or On Education*. It is a treatise on the education of the whole person for responsible citizenship. In it, he opposes many practices of the time, e.g. binding children in swaddling clothes and blankets to restrict their movement and make them sleep more.

Like Luther and Comenius, Rousseau believed that children develop in stages and that they should be facilitated in following what is naturally of interest to them at a particular time in their lives. In Rousseau's time, memory work was a significant feature of children's education. This rote learning was something in which Rousseau saw little value. Instead, he believed that children should be given opportunities to develop judgment and reasoning skills through hands-on experiences. He believed that children aged 0–5 should learn only through play and he rejected the idea that play was essentially doing nothing.

Rousseau advocated play for the development of a healthy body, which he saw as being essential for a healthy mind. He believed that children should be given opportunities to play at what were considered adult pursuits, e.g. football, archery, tennis and the playing of musical instruments. He warned that these play activities should not be turned into work by overinstruction or by making them too adult-led and competitive. Rousseau argued that for children play is work. He believed that the efforts of tutors to waste no time by filling children's heads with 'a pack of rubbish' were utterly futile (Frost 2010: 24). He argued that, through play and real-life experiences children obtain real understanding and skills such as observation, reasoning and judgment.

Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827)

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi was a Swiss teacher and educational reformer. A follower of Rousseau, he was a strong advocate of affording educational opportunities to the poor. In 1769 Pestalozzi bought a plot of 15 acres of land, intending to farm it. The land was poor and he didn't succeed. Pestalozzi then had an idea of opening a school on the farm, which he would call 'Neuhof' and where poor children would come and experience a mixture of 'education and industry'. Pestalozzi did not manage Neuhof well and this project failed, leaving him deeply in debt.

In 1799, Pestalozzi was given another opportunity to open a school. This opportunity came from the Swiss government and the school was opened in the town of Stans in central Switzerland. The French army had just invaded the town of Stans and, as a result, a large number of children were left orphaned there. Pestalozzi was put in charge of the orphanage. He was given no resources and initially ran it himself with a housekeeper. While the school at Stans was only open for a short time (the French army returned and took it over as a military

base), Pestalozzi observed that the children made great progress during their time there. He again adopted the principle of mixing education and industry, combining work with learning and discovery. At this school, Pestalozzi opposed three particular educational practices common at the time: the exclusion of poor children from education, rote learning and cruel punishment.

In 1800 Pestalozzi went to teach in the town of Burgdorf, where he worked and then later founded a new school called the Educational Institute for the Children of the Middle Classes. This school was a financial success but Pestalozzi was disappointed because he was not succeeding in reaching and educating the poor. In 1801 he published a series of letters collectively called *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*. This publication was widely read. In 1805 Pestalozzi opened the institution for which he is most famous, at Yverdon. While the school was not without its problems, it was visited by educators from all over the world and it had a lasting impact on educational practice. Pestalozzi originated the idea of *readiness*, i.e. a child must be cognitively ready to learn something and cannot be rushed into doing so. From his observations he saw that children have to experience objects and events in order to fully understand them, i.e. learning by doing. In *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, Pestalozzi stated that teachers (including parents) must kind and gentle in their approach at all times. He suggested that this could be done through language. Instead of saying 'Wash your hands', a teacher should say: 'Come here, child, and we will wash your little hands.'

While the word 'play' rarely appears in the work of Pestalozzi, he was an early advocate of *free play* as an educational method. Friedrich Froebel studied with Pestalozzi and this influenced his ideas of the centrality of play to ECEC.

Fredrich Froebel (1782-1852)

Fredrich Froebel was influenced by many of the educational philosophers that came before him. He is most famous for his concept of the *kindergarten*, meaning 'garden for children'. Froebel taught at Pestalozzi's school in Yverdon for two years. Although he felt that the goals of the school were noble, he equally felt that a lack of organisation at times impeded the fulfilment of these goals. In 1837 Froebel opened his first school in Blankenburg, Germany. Froebel likened the child to a young plant requiring tender care and nourishment in order to grow. Froebel's vehicle of instruction was play. He believed that all areas of development could be promoted through play: physical development through callisthenic exercises, social development through children playing and working things out together, sense development through exploring and manipulating playthings, and intellectual development through imitative or inventive use of the Froebel gifts and occupations. Froebel's gifts were to be manipulated and played with by the child in their own way and at their own pace. Froebel's occupations included activities such as paper cutting, weaving, threading, drawing and painting.

Froebel believed that play was a vital part of human life:

Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage, and, at the same time, typical of human life as a whole – of the inner hidden natural life in man and all things. It gives, therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the source of all that is good...play at this time [childhood] is of deep significance...the germinal leaves of all later life (Froebel 1887: 55).

Frobel believed in play with natural materials, e.g. pieces of wood used to make huts. He also believed in the value of gardening and other outdoor activities. He believed that every town should have a playground. However, his idea of a playground was very different from modern playgrounds with manufactured equipment. Froebel's version of a playground was very natural, e.g. an ordinary field with trees and flowers.

The Reality of Children's Play Throughout the Ages

Throughout history, regardless of whether or not the great thinkers, educators and governments valued play, children played with whatever materials were available to them. When European settlers landed in America, Australia and New Zealand for the first time, the Native American, Aboriginal and M \bar{a} ori children all played games that are still recognisable to us today. The first settlers to land in America observed Native American children involved in make-believe games mimicking adult pursuits of hunting, fishing, planting and harvesting. They played football, shinny (similar to hockey), quoits (rings), hoop and spear, bounce-onthe-rock, kick-the-stick, tossing games and chasing. These children had the finest of 'playgrounds' with acres of fields, meadows, streams and woodlands in which to build and defend forts, make bows and arrows, and play tag and hiding games. The European settlers, who wished to escape the cramped and dirty cities of their homelands, readily adopted these new ways and allowed their children much more freedom to play. They also maintained many games from their homelands, e.g. singing games, kites, blind man's buff, hopscotch, cards and dice games. Manufactured toys were limited (except for the children of the rich in Europe) and most were made from scraps of material, wood and metal, e.g. rag dolls. Play during this time (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) was very gender focused.

Throughout history, children around the world have been forced to live in difficult circumstances because of political, economic and civil unrest. However, it is clear that children have an unwavering instinct and will to play. Even in times of child labour and abject poverty, children still play. This is evidenced in writings from American slave folklore, the Industrial Revolution in Europe, the Great Depression in America and the Great Famine in Ireland.

After the Industrial Revolution, children who lived in huge slum tenements in cities all over the world learned to play in the streets. In many cities, the authorities sought to curb this play, since children were involved in petty crime such as pickpocketing. A new game now emerged – avoidance. Children continued to play in the streets and, when adults or authority figures chased them, this in turn became a game of tag.

In response to deprivation in cities across the world, many governments began providing playgrounds for poor city children, e.g. London and New York. Some city councils were more aware of the importance of nature in children's lives and they realised that, while the urban playgrounds they created were of benefit, children also needed to experience the countryside. This lead to organised summer camps and the development of organisations such as the boy scouts in the early 1900s.

Jane Addams (1860–1935) was an American philosopher and activist who founded Hull House in Chicago in 1889. At its height, Hull House was visited each week by around two thousand people. Its facilities included a night school for adults, kindergarten classes, clubs for older children, a public kitchen, an art gallery, a coffeehouse, a gym, a girls' club, a bathhouse, a book bindery, a music school, a drama group, and a library, as well as labour-related divisions. Addams created a 'model playground' of over an acre, which was equipped with sand, building blocks, swings, a giant stride (like a huge maypole) and an outdoor games area. She was also an advocate of community events and festival celebrations.

Ireland in 1900 was just coming out of the Great Famine and was still predominately an agricultural based society. The majority of Irish children were living in rural areas, mixing work with play. Ireland had few large cities and it lagged behind other countries in terms of provision of outdoor recreational space for children, especially in poor inner city areas where children played mainly on the streets.

In the early twentieth century in America, the Playground Association of America worked towards providing all city-born children with good outdoor playground facilities. Hundreds of municipal playgrounds were opened in cities across the United States. This also happened in many other cities across the world. There was recognition of the fact that city children needed outdoor play opportunities. A significant criticism of the playground movement in America was the fact that playgrounds omitted nature: they had no grass, flowers or trees. Instead, they were equipped with manufactured play equipment bolted to the ground.

While manufactured toys have been around for centuries, they have largely been the preserve of children of the rich. Exquisitely made dolls, dolls houses, teddy bears, trains and train sets have existed for centuries. However, most children worldwide had little access to manufactured toys until the 1930s and 1940s; even then, children had one or two items each at most.

Many observers of children and their play patterns worry that as children receive more and more manufactured toys their natural curiosity and inventiveness has declined. Many toys nowadays require solitary indoor play. Video games are in abundance, where the game manufacturer essentially decides what the child does. Because of heightened awareness of

health and safety issues, many children no longer play together on the streets or in nature. Most spend large amounts of time inside or in sterile playgrounds and parks. Many psychologists and educationists worry that this will impede children's coping and decision-making skills.

Decade	Most popular toys
1930s	Pogo stick, magic slate, Duncan yo-yo, Mickey Mouse doll, Monopoly, Sorry, View-Master, cap gun, trampoline, Snoopy Sniffer
1940s	Scrabble, Cootie, model airplane, Silly Putty, Slinky, bubbles, paper doll, Magic 8 Ball, Cluedo, Candy Land
1950s	Barbie, Play-Doh, Frisbee, Tonka trucks, Matchbox cars, Yahtzee, skateboards, hula hoops, Mr. Potato Head, Pez dispensers
1960s	Hot Wheels, LEGO, Action Man, Easy Bake Oven, Etch A Sketch, Superball, Game of Life, Sea-monkeys, Barrel of Monkeys, Operation, Scalextric, Twister, Spirograph
1970s	Atari 2600, Uno, Rubik's Cube, Simon, Dungeons and Dragons, Hungry Hungry Hippos, Connect Four, Star Wars action figures, Magna Doodle, NERF balls, space hopper, Clackers
1980s	Cabbage Patch Kids, Trivial Pursuit, My Little Pony, Koosh balls, Transformers, Pictionary, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Chia Pets, JENGA, All Terrain Armored Transport (Star Wars Walker)
1990s	Pogs, Tickle Me Elmo, Furby, Super Soaker, Beanie Babies, Game Boy, Buzz Lightyear, Power Rangers, Tamagotchi, Pokemon, K'nex construction kits, Pokemon trading cards
2000s	Wii, Playstation 3, Xbox 360, Sony PSP, Nintendo DS, iPods, Bratz dolls, ultra-lifelike dolls (Baby Annabell), animatronic toys (Robosapien and Roboraptor), hi-tech remote control toys (Flytech Dragonfly), Top Trumps, Geomag, child computers (Dora the Explorer laptop), electronic puzzle games (20Q), merchandise from the Harry Potter films

Styles and Types of Play

Play can be classified in two ways:

- 1 Overall style
 - Structured play
 - Free play.
- 2 Types of play
 - Imaginative
 - Construction
 - Creative
 - Physical.

Styles of Play

Structured Play

Structured play is planned, guided and led by adults. Structured play can be useful but there is a risk that if it is too adult-led children will lose interest. Offering the right amount of support is absolutely essential in providing for valuable structured play. Adults can provide

support by demonstrating skills that the child can then try out for themselves, e.g. how to use a piece of equipment. Some theorists advocated a very structured approach. Montessori advocated that certain skills should be very clearly demonstrated by the adult, with the child carefully watching so that they could then copy exactly what the adult had done, e.g. spooning rice. She argued that children like to achieve perfection and are motivated by it. She was therefore a strong advocate of structured activity.

Another key ingredient of successful structured play is that the activity is at the correct level for the children. There is absolutely no point in presenting children with activities that are outside what Vygotsky called their *zone of proximal development*. If the activity is beyond what the child can do even with adult support, the adult ends up practically doing the activity for the child and this does not aid learning. Activities set for children should be challenging, but not beyond them. Practitioners should not feel that children have to produce 'presentable' pieces of work for parents; they should concentrate more on children's enjoyment in learning from what they do.

Free Play

Free play is not adult-led. Adults provide equipment, materials and resources for free play, but they do not direct it in any way. Advocates of free play believe that children learn much more from this style of play than from structured play, since they are more motivated by having created it themselves. In free play, children direct and figure things out for themselves and it is believed that children gain deeper understanding of what they are doing as a result of this. Free play can take place when children are on their own, in groups, in pairs or engaged in parallel play (i.e. where children play side-by-side but not with one another). In the past, much of children's play was free play. Children did not have many manufactured toys and they did not attend crèches and pre-schools with structured activities. Instead, they played with what happened to be available to them. It is a worry that nowadays so much of children's lives is structured and adult led. Some parents feel that they are in an ever-competitive environment, expecting their children to be making observable progress in pre-school. Practitioners should communicate to parents that process rather than product is of importance in the early years.

Types of Play

Imaginative play

Imaginative play includes pretend, symbolic and fantasy play. It is sometimes referred to as role play.



Pretend play

In this type of play, children practise and gain understanding of aspects of daily life. Children play school, shop, hospital, house, post office, restaurant, farm, etc. The role of the adult in pretend play is to provide an array of clothing and props for children to use. Clothing and props do not have to be 'perfect': children should be encouraged to improvise and make use of what is available to them. Small-world toys such as Playmobil can be used for pretend play.

Fantasy Play

Fantasy play is most common for children aged 3–8. During fantasy play children pretend to be something or someone that they cannot ever possibly be, e.g. Spiderman or Batman. This type of play should decrease as reasoning increases.

Symbolic Play

With this type of play children use objects in their play, but they pretend that the objects are something else. Symbolic play can be merged with imaginary play, e.g. pretending leaves are salad ingredients. Symbolic play becomes imaginary play (as describe above) when several objects are used together. For example, children can use mud, grass, leaves and berries as 'food'; they can sit on concrete blocks and makeshift tables eating food off slate 'plates', with sticks and pieces of stone as 'knives and forks'.

Providing for Imaginative Play

Parents and practitioners can provide dress-up clothes, including clothing from other cultures. Small-world toys and props can be used to recreate different scenes, e.g. house, shop, restaurant, post office, bank and school. (See Chapter 8 for more ideas.)

Construction Play

Construction play can either use manufactured or non-manufactured materials. Manufactured construction materials include products such as Aerofix models, LEGO, Scalextric, K'nex and Geomag. Children can also engage in productive construction play with non-manufactured materials such as boxes, egg cartons, kitchen roll, tins, glue, sticky tape, pieces of wood, nails, elastic bands, cloth and safety pins. The possibilities are endless. With construction play, some children (particularly older children) will have an 'end product' in mind; but this is not the most important part of the process for them. With this type of play, the adult can provide resources and ideas about what might be constructed. However, it is important not to try to direct this type of play or else children hand over to the adult.

Providing for Construction Play

Parents and practitioners can provide construction blocks, cardboard boxes, tape, paper plates, kitchen rolls and other 'junk' material that can be used for construction. (See Chapter 8 for more ideas.)

Creative Play

Creative play encompasses activities such as art, craft, drawing, painting, music and dance. The important thing about creative play is to provide plenty of materials and equipment to allow it happen. Creative play can allow children to express emotion and indicate upset or distress. Adults should not make judgments on children's creative work, since children become anxious and fearful about creating things that are acceptable to adults.

Providing for Creative Play

Children should have access to a wide range of creative materials, e.g. paint, brushes, sponges, play-dough, clay, collage materials, sand, crayons, markers, chalk, glitter, glue, etc. (See Chapter 8 for more ideas.)

Physical Play

Physical play can take place indoors or outdoors and it can involve equipment such as wheeled toys, climbing frames, balls, skipping ropes. During physical play, children run, jump, balance, climb and crawl. Physical play is vital for children's health: it not only keeps them fit

but it also encourages them to eat and sleep well. Ball games, tag and tip-the-can all come under the category of physical play. It is this type of play that many children nowadays seem to miss, spending large amounts of time at home on computers or watching TV instead. In addition, in many pre-school and school yards children's physical play is curbed because of health and safety issues. They are told not to run and if the weather is cold or wet, they are often kept inside.

Providing for Physical Play

Physical play can be encouraged with large outdoor equipment, balls, hoops, wheeled toys, hop-scotch, skipping ropes, etc. (See Chapter 8 for more ideas.)

Hughes (1996) further categorises children's play into 15 play types. Some of these play types can be incorporated into the four main types described above.

Type of play	Description
Symbolic play	Using items to represent something else
Rough and tumble play	Playful fighting, wrestling and chasing
Socio-dramatic play	The enactment of real and potential experiences of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature, e.g. playing house, going to the shops or even having an argument
Social play	Any social or interactive situation that contains an expectation on all parties that they will abide by the rules or protocols, i.e. games with rules, conversations, making something together
Creative play	Creating pictures or artefacts using a range of materials
Communication play	Using words, nuances or gestures, e.g. mime, jokes, play acting, singing, debate, poetry
Dramatic play	Dramatising events in which the child is not a direct participator, e.g. presentation of a TV show
Deep play	Play that allows the child to encounter risky experiences in order to develop survival skills and conquer fear, e.g. climbing a tree or walking along a high beam
Exploratory play	Exploring objects and what they can do, e.g. stacking bricks, mixing substances together to see what will happen
Fantasy play	Pretending to be someone unlikely or enacting far-fetched occurrences, e.g. racing driver or princess
lmaginative play	Play where the conventional rules that govern the physical world do not apply, e.g. children imagining they are dinosaurs
Locomotor play	Movement in any and every direction for its own sake, e.g. chase, tag, hide-and-seek, tree climbing
Mastery play	Controlling physical and affective ingredients of the environments, e.g. digging holes, changing the course of streams, constructing huts
Object play	Using objects for their intended or unintended purpose, e.g. sweeping brush
Role play	Play exploring ways of being, although not normally of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature, e.g. dialling and talking on the telephone, driving a car

Stages of Play

As children get older, the ways in which they play change. These changes are often represented as stages of play. An age range for each stage is usually given, although (as with all areas of development) some children pass through stages sooner than others. A three-year-old child who has several older siblings may come into the pre-school setting already engaging in cooperative play. Likewise, a child who is the eldest or only child in their family many spend longer at the solitary and spectator stage. Adults should observe children's play and support them with transitions between play stages. This is particularly important when working with children who have special needs that may affect their social skills and ability to interact with other children, e.g. language delay.

Stage of play	Age range	Description
Solitary	0-2	Children play alone, interacting little with other children around them
Spectator	2-21/2	Children play alone but watch what others are doing around them without joining in
Parallel	2½-3	Children play alongside others but not together
Associative	3–4	 Children begin to interact and play together but there is still a good deal of solitary play Children begin to develop friendships and show preferences for playing with particular children Play groups are usually mixed-gender
Co-operative	4+	 Children play together, discussing goals for their play Play can be quite complex at this stage, with group members carrying out particular roles As children reach primary school age they begin to play in single-gender groups and play can become stereotypical

Benefits of Play to Holistic Development

Aistear recognises the enormous body of research that shows that young children (particularly those aged 0–6) learn most effectively through play and that more directive methods do not work but actually curb children's natural desire to explore and discover. This section describes how play benefits all five areas of development: physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social (PILES). This links with Aistear's four themes: wellbeing, identity and belonging, communicating, and exploring and thinking.

Physical Development: Wellbeing

Physical play, particularly rough and tumble, deep and locomotor play, promotes gross-motor skills. Children develop balance and increase co-ordination through practising skills such as running, jumping, climbing, skipping, walking on tiptoe, hopping, pedalling, etc. Physical play also promotes health and wellbeing because it increases appetite and tires children so that they sleep well. Physical development also involves the development and refinement of finemotor skills; creative and construction play are both particularly beneficial in this area. Play

with small-world toys as part of imaginative play can also be useful, since children need to refine their motor-skills to make toy figures and animals stand up, etc.

Intellectual Development: Exploring and Thinking

Through play children can explore and think about a wide range of concepts in a non-threatening way. Play cannot be 'wrong' so children are much more likely to take risks with their learning when they are engaged in play. Children can begin to understand important mathematical concepts, such as number, matching, ordering, sorting, making and recognising pattern, adding and subtracting, and measuring (weight, length, time, volume, capacity, shape and space). Through construction play, children can practise reasoning and problem-solving skills. Some types of play (e.g. role play) allow children to explore aspects of their real life (e.g. a visit to the hospital or dentist). This helps them to understand these events and helps them to process concerns or worries.

Language Development: Communicating

Virtually all types of play involve communication. Children negotiate their roles, talk about what they are doing and talk about their plans for what will happen next. During sociodramatic play children can learn new vocabulary (e.g. 'cash register' if playing shop). When playing games with rules, children have to explain rules to newcomers and verbally deal with situations when the game rules are broken. Adults can promote language development by suggesting new vocabulary while children are playing and labelling areas of the play environment.

Emotional Development: Identity and Belonging, and Communicating

Emotional development involves children learning to deal with their emotions (both negative and positive) in a healthy way. Emotional development also involves the promotion of a positive self-image and high self-esteem. Emotional development can be greatly enhanced through play. While at play children can try out new things in a non-threatening way. Play cannot be 'wrong' so children's efforts are always rewarding to them, thus boosting self-esteem and helping children to develop a positive self-image. Physical play, particularly rough and tumble, gives children a safe outlet for negative emotions, e.g. anger and frustration. Role play and pretend play can give children the opportunity to act out scenes from their lives that may perhaps be bothering them, thus giving the adult an insight into how the child is thinking and feeling.

Games that require co-operation between children and games with rules teach children to control their emotions and to deal well with situations that are not going their way, e.g. if the rest of the group don't want to follow a particular idea, the child may have to accept the

group's decision even though they do not agree with it. Some games have a winner, which means that there will be losers also. Games such as these help children to cope with competition and deal with defeat. These games are particularly important nowadays, since many children come from small families. They do not have to deal with competition very often and sometimes they find it hard to handle when it does arise. They are used to parents 'letting them win' and can get upset when this does not happen.

Play environments should reflect the diverse nature of our society. Play opportunities should, insofar as possible, be available to all children in the setting. This is why it is very important that settings make provision for children with special needs, allowing them to fully participate in all play activities offered. Cultural diversity should also be reflected in the play environment, e.g. dress-up clothes and cooking utensils from different cultures. Gender is another important issue to consider. Both boys and girls should be encouraged to participate in all types of play. If one gender seems to be dominating a particular area of the setting, this should be discussed with the children and a workable solution found.

Social Development: Identity and Belonging, and Communicating

Social development basically involves the development of three related skills: (1) the ability to interact effectively with others, (2) learning and understanding the norms of the society in which the child lives and (3) moral development. Play can be a very effective way for children to learn and perfect these skills. Social play requires that children negotiate, take turns and follow rules. Creative play often requires children to share materials and equipment, thus teaching them to request things and wait for them if they are not immediately available. Accidents that happen during play (e.g. a child falling during physical play) require the other children to show empathy and to get help. Role play helps children to practise everyday skills: taking care of babies, making and serving meals, asking for food in a restaurant, asking for and paying for items in a shop, etc.

Play can be used to teach children who have difficulties in one or more areas of social development. For example, if a child in a setting has a tendency to pull toys from other children and not wait their turn, the teacher could organise a cutting and pasting activity where children have to share scissors and glue pots. The teacher can deliberately have fewer scissors and glue pots than are needed and they can then role play as part of the activity, showing the children how to ask nicely for things and to politely wait until it is their turn.