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THE 12 FEATURES OF PLAY

Introduction

Professor Tina Bruce (1991, 2015) identifies 12 features to help us recognise the most obvious characteristics of young children's learning through play. The 12 features of play give ECE students further insight into how children are learning and they can be used with the network for learning as a tool to evaluate the quality of experiences that we offer them.

The first feature states: 'In their play, children use first-hand experiences they have had in life.'

As we previously talked about, experience is important for learning. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) suggest that first-hand experiences are vital for children to learn, to think and to construct knowledge. When children have the opportunity to handle natural everyday objects in their learning environment, such as stones or pebbles, they advance in their knowledge of the physical properties. The more children experiment and repeat their explorations, they will learn that some stones are heavy, others are light, some are smooth, others are rough, rounded or sharp. In other words, young children will learn these concepts, not through being taught, but through their first-hand experience (Zosh et al., 2017). According to Piaget and Inhelder (1969), the first-hand experience of observing and handling objects and materials enables children to begin to compare them.

ECE students need to base young children's learning on the content of their everyday lives. In this way, we can ensure that the experiences being offered have connections and meaning for the child. This is because young children do not simply develop knowledge and understanding by being directed or told what to do by adults. Instead, young children are actively involved in looking, seeking, finding, feeling and exploring. This is how children receive information and make sense of it – while they are doing.

Faith (3 years, 4 months) was observed pouring sand from one cup to another. When an adult moved closer, Faith offered her a cup, saying 'tea, hot, hot!' The adult blew on the 'tea', pretending that she was cooling it down. Faith smiled at her and repeated this game for a while.

Ultimately, when children are engaged in first-hand experiences, they are active in both mind and body. When children interact and respond in their immediate environment, they are working out how to do things. Meaningful first-hand experiences provide young children with the opportunity to test out, confirm or alter their thinking and ideas about how things work and what they can do with things to make them work.

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- ECE students need to reflect on how they are supporting and building on children's first-hand experiences, existing knowledge and interests.
- How are you supporting children to make meaning from their everyday routine experiences?
- How are you using the child's awareness of symbols to support their development and understanding?

The second feature states: 'Play does not bow to pressure to conform to external rules, outcomes, targets or adult-led projects. Because of this, children keep control as they play.'

Here, ECE students are required to observe children's play with interest, be on hand to make suggestions, and act as a facilitator, enabling the children to be autonomous learners where they have choice, rather than bombarding them with a list of questions. When children are in control of their own play, they are often deeply engaged. They concentrate and take time to observe, ponder, evaluate and make sense of their experiences. Young children are very aware when adults attempt to take control of their play and will often react by retreating. It is vital that ECE students understand that children learn through play and they will need to have an abundance of opportunities where they are able to choose and control the outcomes of their own play. This happens when children are free to use resources and materials in their own way. ECE students should not try to take control of what children learn. The next observation captures an episode of children's learning in which an adult provides guidance after observing.

An adult approached James (3 years, 7 months) and Ben (3 years, 5 months) as they were looking up at the wall. She asked them, 'What are you doing?' James replied, 'We are making mud balls and throwing them on the wall and they're going splat.' The adult asked, 'Where are you getting the mud from?' James replied, 'From over there', pointing to under the tree. As it was not clean, the adult encouraged James and Ben to go and wash their hands. When they returned, the adult asked James and Ben, 'Is there any another way that you could do this?' James said, 'No... well, maybe balls', so the boys went off and collected a couple of balls and started throwing them at the wall. James said, 'It's not the same, it doesn't splat.' The adult found some soil in a bag and gave it to the boys. James and Ben put some in a bucket, added some water and then felt it with their hands. 'No, this isn't going to work,' said James, adding more water. He put his hands in again. 'No, need more water.' Ben watched as James added more, until it was wet enough to make a mud ball. James then carried the bucket to the wall and threw a mud ball against it, which went splat. James jumped up and down and did a little dance. He continued to put his hands into the mud to make more mud balls.

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- What do you think about the conversation that was recorded in this observation? Is this observation helpful in giving you a sequence of events so that you can see what James and Ben were thinking about and interested in?
- What does this observation tell you about the cognitive and physical levels of Ben and James' development?
- What does it tell you about Ben and James' friendship?
- How did James express himself?
- What does it tell you about the significance of the play?
- How often do you impose external rules on children's play?

The third feature states: 'Play is a process. It has no products. When the play ends it vanishes as quickly as it arrived.'

Children need to have the time and space to explore, discover and experiment in their own way. Play for young children is deeply serious – it is, as Froebel suggests, a child's work. ECE students will observe children running around, balancing on a wall, jumping off a step and repeating it, or riding a bike fast down a slope. In all of these activities the children are engaged in the process of play. When children are engaged in this way they are learning through doing without the external pressure of producing something. It is important that ECE students help children to express themselves and focus on the process of learning rather than the end product. Engagement in the process of play allows for children's interpretations of how they want to do things without having an end result in mind. Sometimes when students plan activities for children they may have very clear

ideas about what they want the end product to look like. If a sticking activity is planned, students might expect the children to have glued materials onto the paper (the product). If a student focuses on the process instead, they may encourage the child to drizzle the glue, or explore the textures of the resource, observing the child engaging in the process of learning. In this way, students can use the process to enhance young children's learning.

Rosie (2 years, 1 month) was observed running in circles. Later she placed her hat on the ground and ran around it until she got dizzy and fell to the floor. She then got up and repeated the process all over again.

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- Can you notice any patterns in Rosie's play? What are her strategies for learning?
- What does this observation tell you about the way in which Rosie is choosing to explore and discover her environment?
- How often do you encourage children to make props from natural materials?
- Children need opportunities to develop their symbolic play. Could you do more?

The fourth feature states: 'Children choose to play. It is intrinsically motivated. It arises spontaneously when conditions are conducive, and it is sustained as it flows.'

Intrinsic motivation means that the child is self-motivated to work towards a particular goal that they have set for themselves. Intrinsic motivation gives young children the freedom to explore and act on the things that they are interested in. Play is intrinsically motivated – we cannot force a child to play, children have to want to play. When children choose to play, they choose what game they want to play. They decide how they will play it, what they will use in their play and what part they will take. In this way, play can help children to advance in their development and learning because they do not have to follow rules and restrictions set by others, giving them the freedom to be creative. When children are intrinsically motivated, significant learning happens. ECE students need to understand the importance of children's intrinsic motivation to their levels of engagement.

Charlotte (3 years, 5 months) had been observed over the week doing lots of mark making with chalk. She was very interested in the different bright colours. Charlotte used each colour to make lines and circles on the floor outside. It had rained a little and left a small puddle of water. Charlotte dipped the chalk in the rainwater to make it wet. As Charlotte began to make marks, she started to combine the chalks to better mix colours. She was delighted as she watched the colours get brighter and change the colour of the water.

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- How has Charlotte's play with the chinks helped to develop her creativity?
- How much are the children in your school or setting leading their own play?
- How much choice do the children have about who, what and where to play?
- Are children encouraged to do things in their own way?

The fifth feature states: 'Children rehearse their possible futures in their play. Play helps children to learn to function in advance of what they can do in the present.'

Young children are interested in what roles the adults around them do – what it is like to be a mother, father, teacher, policeman, builder, nurse or shopkeeper. Enacting these roles opens up many different possibilities for what children might become when they grow up. It also helps children to think about what it must be like to be a mother, father or doctor. ECE students will observe children rehearsing their future roles through their play. Some children will dress up and act out being a builder or traffic warden. Playing with roles in this way helps children to learn about specific tasks that a traffic warden might do, such as giving out parking tickets, and enact them in context. Children will rehearse whatever techniques they consider to be significant in the role that they have taken on. Pretend play allows children an opportunity to explore different roles and characters of the people that they experience in their everyday lives.

Aidan (2 years, 9 months) had been observed exploring with the wooden blocks and cardboard boxes in the garden. He dragged one of the boxes over to the slide and placed the cardboard box on three crates. He then put the box down and put his finger up, as if he was pushing a button. As he was pushing the button, he made an 'aaah' noise. Aidan then started to drag the cardboard box away. An adult asked, 'What are you doing?' Aidan replied, 'I am collecting rubbish and putting it in the machine.' He then went off, returned and repeated the action and the noise. The adult asked Aidan, 'What happens to the rubbish when you put it into the machine?' 'It smashes it,' Aidan replied. He spent most of the morning doing this. Later that afternoon he collected another cardboard box and the wooden blocks and put them in the machine. Later, Aidan was overheard telling another child, 'It is at the back of the dustcart, you know, where all the rubbish goes.'

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- Can you describe how this kind of play is helping Aidan to develop confidence in himself and what he might be in the future?
- What kinds of worlds do you observe that have been created by the children you work with?
- Is it just make believe or is it a mix of real and pretend?

The sixth feature states: 'Play can be solitary, and this sort of play is often very deep. Children learn who they are and how to face and deal with their ideas, feelings, relationships and physical bodies.'

Solitary play means children choosing to play alone. Sometimes children need time to play alone to develop their ideas, knowledge, feelings and understanding. As a result, solitary play is beneficial and important because it allows children to have personal space as well as offering opportunities for reflection, repetition and consideration. Solitary play also gives children the freedom to be in control of what happens when. ECE students should not force a child who wants to play alone to play with others. Children need time where they can be by themselves. Playing on their own gives children the freedom to do things their way, try new ideas and take risks. Ultimately, the role of the student is to observe while respecting the child's behaviour in order to be able to understand it.

Charlie (3 years, 3 months) was seen playing on his own. He threw a wooden car up onto the wall and it landed on a ledge. He tried to reach the ledge but it was too high. He found a plank of wood and tried to reach the car, but he only pushed it further back onto the ledge. He said out loud, 'It's not working, I need a long stick.' Charlie returned with the broom and at first used the handle end. 'That's not going to work,' he said, then turned the broom around and used the head to brush the car off.

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- How would you explain to a parent about the importance of children playing alone?
- Do any of your observations capture children doing things alone that they are interested in?
- Make a list of three benefits of solitary play.

The seventh feature states: 'Play has the potential to take children into a world of pretend. They imagine other worlds, creating stories of possible and impossible worlds beyond the here and now, in the past, present and future, and it transforms them into different characters.'

Pretend play is intrinsically motivated and is chosen by the child. It can be simple – a child using a block as a car – or it can be more complex, a child taking on a role in a make-believe situation. Pretend play can help children to use and develop their imagination in creative and abstract ways. In many respects, pretend play is a child's way of not just recalling a past experience but also of developing their understanding about the world that they live in. When children are engaged in pretend play in which they act out a role, they are beginning to understand what people do in different roles and situations.

Pretend play is important for children, as it enables them to understand and cope with their experiences. Children play out their experiences before they can talk. ECE students can help children by giving them time to play and by supporting and encouraging this kind of play.

Kiyan (3 years) was playing with large wooden blocks in the garden. He laid one block on the ground and then started to build around it with taller blocks. He spent some time adjusting the blocks until he was happy with their position. Kiyan then put four much longer blocks around the taller blocks and climbed inside. An adult approached and asked what he had made. Kiyan replied that it was a jail and he was in jail. Kiyan would not let any of the other children into the jail. He told the adult that he did not want them in there. After a short while Kiyan extended the structure and built more walls around the edge. The adult asked him if he was making his jail bigger. He said, 'No, it's a boat.' He would not let other children inside his boat. He docked his boat and then said he needed a sail so that he could move.

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- Are your observations capturing children representing things symbolically?
- Do your observations capture children as complex symbol users?
- Can you see what knowledge and understanding Kiyan has about what makes a boat sail?
- How could you use this information to support his understanding?
- Do you reflect on how much symbolic knowledge children are using as they play and explore?

The eighth feature states: 'Children and/or adults can play together, in parallel (companionship play), associatively or co-operatively in pairs or groups.'

Co-operative play is social play. It encourages children to play together and helps them to learn about social skills and getting along with others, as well as encouraging them to share and take turns.

Jada (3 years, 6 months) and Robyn (3 years, 8 months) were observed playing together in a mud 'kitchen'. They prepared the food using stones, shells and pebbles and then set the table. Jada served the food and Robyn poured out the water. The girls were overheard planning what and how they would play. Jada said, 'Let's go to the shops to buy some ice cream before we go to the park. Let's take the car, I can drive.'

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- Do your observations capture how pretend play helps children to communicate?
- Are you observing how children express their ideas and feelings?
- Think about your last observation in which you saw children pretending as they played. What do you think was important to them?
- How do you think that this kind of play helps to develop the whole child?

The ninth feature states: 'Play can be initiated by a child or an adult, but adults need to bear in mind that every player has his or her own personal play agenda (of which he or she may be unaware) and respect this by not insisting that the adult agenda dominates the play.'

ECE students will need to know how and when to intervene in children's play, so that it remains child-led (Fisher, 2016). This means that students need to be able to recognise and respect the agency and motivation behind the play of individual children.

An adult set up the role play area into a shop and wanted the children to practise their use of number skills. The children did not want to play shops – instead they wanted to make face masks, put on hand sanitiser and play games about queuing and social distancing. One child wanted to make the coronavirus. The adult took the children's play ideas seriously and went with them. She supported the play by suggesting that the children could also make signs showing two metres distance and signs to let shoppers know how many people were allowed in the store. In this way, the adult recognises and respects the children's agency and motivation.

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- What was important for you in this observation? What would you have written down? What did you find interesting?
- How seriously do you take children's pretend play on a scale of one to ten? (Ten being very seriously.)
- Can you think about a time when children invited you to join in their play? Did you take their ideas and questions seriously?
- Can you think about a time when you may have joined in play without being invited? In this situation, were you aware of the children's personal agenda?
- Do your observations capture children leading their own interests in play which they are free to explore?
- Do you feel confident intervening in children's play?

- Can you think of a time that you were able to intervene in child-initiated play sensitively?
- Do your observations capture the motivations behind children's actions?

The tenth feature states: 'Children's free-flow play is characterised by deep concentration, and it is difficult to distract them from their learning. Children at play wallow in their learning.'

Young children need to have uninterrupted time to play so that they can explore the things that interest them (Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, 1999). If children are not interested in what they are doing it can be difficult for them to concentrate.

While on a trip to the zoo, Harry (3 years) was not interested in looking at the elephants. He was much more interested in studying a passing wheelchair. Harry could not take his eyes off the chair. He insisted that his mother followed the chair so that he could see how it moved. When he got home, Harry tipped his pushchair on its side and started to spin the wheels again and again. Later in the week, Harry found a small world figure of a little girl in a wheelchair. He spent a long time walking around with it. He then found an adult figure to place behind the wheelchair to push the little girl around.

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- How are your observations of play capturing children's mental development?
- How are children making their ideas visible in your observations?
- Can you see any links and/or connections between how Harry is exploring his ideas, feelings and experiences?

The eleventh feature states: 'In play, children try out their most recent learning, mastery, competencies and skills, and consolidate them. They use their technical prowess and confidently apply their learning.'

This means that children will demonstrate what they know and can do in their play. When ECE students observe children at play they will notice that children will apply their previous learning to it. As Froebel says:

The mind grows by self-revelation. In play the child ascertains what he can do, discovers his possibilities of will and thought by exerting his power spontaneously. In work he follows a task prescribed for him by another and doesn't reveal his own proclivities and inclinations; but another's. In play he reveals his own original power. (1887: 54–5)

This means that, in play, children will apply their recent learning.

Tia (3 years, 11 months) was seen exploring the tessellation shapes. She spent some time just looking at them. After a while, Tia began to select the hexagons from the middle of the pile and, one by one, she placed them around the outside of another hexagon, pushing the shapes together to form a pattern with no gaps. At one point there was a tiny gap, so she added a diamond shape which brought the pattern together. When she ran out of diamond shapes, she found two triangles which she put together to make a diamond and placed it in the gap of the hexagonal shapes.

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- Can you see how Tia was able to use what she knew in her play?
- Do your observations capture children experimenting and finding things out for themselves?
- How do you use your observations to build on what children already know and can do?
- Do you collect observations of children applying what they know to their play?
- This observation of Tia shows clearly how play and development are connected.

The twelfth feature states: 'Children at play co-ordinate their ideas and feelings and make sense of relationships with family, friends and culture. Play is an integrating mechanism that allows flexible, adaptive, imaginative and innovative behaviour. Play makes children into whole people, able to keep balancing their lives in a fast-changing world.'

In play, children co-ordinate their ideas, thoughts and feelings, as well as their physical bodies. They are able to make sense of their social relationships and their sense of themselves within the world around them. Ultimately, play is a child's main way of recalling their experiences. The process enables children to use their play in creative and imaginative ways. As play develops, children are able to come up with new ideas and ways of doing things in order to keep their play going. It important to keep in mind that, in order for a child to use what they have seen in their play, they need to make it part of themselves. They have to put it together and understand it in some way.

Alex (3 years, 2 months) was observed playing with a fire station on the play mat. He then went off and came back with a fire engine and three police officer figures, saying that they were firemen. He pushed the truck around the road looking for a fire. He spent some time clearing trees that were blocking the road. When he finally reached the fire, he made a 'ssssshhhh' noise, like the water from a hose. He then kept this going, looking for other fires to put out.

Case Study Questions and Reflection

- Are your observations capturing play that flows?
- Do your observations capture how children use play to bring their ideas and feelings together?
- How closely are you observing children?
- Observation is vital if ECE students are to understand and interpret children's play.

Observation and the 12 Features

Play for children is an important part of being human and alive – they need to play and try out ideas (Froebel, 1887). Students' observations should always emanate from children being actively involved in the experience. The 12 features seek to highlight the central importance of play. Through studying them and being aware of them, ECE students can gain a deeper knowledge and understanding about the children they work with. It is the pedagogical responsibility of the ECE student to gather observational information that informs how they support and plan for individual children's development, interests, communication and learning styles. ECE students' observations need to identify and note significant learning so that they can plan ways to nourish and enrich the child's experience. Students need to learn to act on what they observe, using observational information to make appropriate assessments of where children are in their development and learning, in order to support them sensitively. In 1840, Froebel considered observations to be a fundamental part of practice and that play was a 'child's work'. He understood the importance of allowing children the freedom to learn new things for themselves and not to discourage them from doing something, even if the adult thought it might not be safe, such as climbing trees. Today's research indicates that, in the most effective schools and settings, observation is acknowledged as a crucial aspect of the educator's role and as such is given appropriate status in relation to everyday practice. Educators are not technicians, filling in forms, pulling levers and pressing buttons to produce regulated approved end products. Instead, they are observing and gathering information from all sorts of sources, including intuition about children, in order to make the most accurate assessment or judgement that they can about what children know and what children don't know (Drummond, 1993).

Reflection

Students need to:

- Recognise that observing the 12 features of play will give them specific information about children's development and understanding.

- Regularly take time out to observe and listen to what children are saying and doing.
- Always reflect on how meaningful the experience that you are offering children is.

Conclusion

The 12 features of play highlight key indicators that we need to pay attention to. Observing the way that play co-ordinates development and learning includes how we see children make use of first-hand experiences, keep control in the way they make rules, follow their own play agenda, and not become easily distracted. They create pretend play scenarios, make props, try out ideas and feelings and make sense of their lives, choosing when and how to play alone, or with other children or adults (Bruce, 1991 and 2019).

The observations that ECE students make of toddlers and young children will capture the different ways in which children play. When ECE students understand and recognise what they see children doing, they are in a great position to support and extend children's learning. In the next chapter, we will explore schemas and why children like to do things again and again.

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