

Children in early years care have two main needs, care and education. This is called a combined holistic approach to children's care and educational needs. Many theorists have influenced the way young children are educated today. The three most influential being Froebel, Montessori and Steiner, their ideas are still used in the education of children today throughout schools, nursery's and crèches. Learning through play is one of the key points all of the above theorists shared.

Froebel introduced the idea of Kindergarten meaning children's garden. He likened a developing child to a seed growing and unfolding into a flower, hence the name kindergarten. He believed in structured learning, providing children with gifts to play with such as balls, cubes cylinders of different shapes, colours and sizes. The trained practitioner would teach the child understanding of shape size and colour while the child handled the gifts. Froebel also believed in allowing children to use various materials to fold, cut and sew enhancing the child's developing motor skills. Through Froebel it is widely recognised Early Years staff need training, governments today are using his theory and funding training so all EY staff get trained to understand how a child learns.

Maria Montessori originally from a medical background, recognised children needed guiding rather than over directing. Many children in the past were taught while rigidly sitting at table listening to the adult teach. This would often last too long and the children's concentration would wander and learning could not take place.

Montessori saw the necessity for a stimulating environment as a tool to help children take responsibility for their own learning. She, like Froebel would carefully organise activities that would create an interest to the child thus engaging the child in learning through play.

Rudolph Steiner is a theorist still spoken of today. His influence has helped create over 800 schools in many countries, that follow Steiner's principles as an alternative to mainstream education. His approaches are also used within mainstream education. Steiner thought of a person as spirit, body and soul with three developmental stages. These stages being early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence. These three stages are mirrored today in schools as nursery, primary and secondary education. Steiner's Early Years education methods are very much based on the spiritual unfolding of a child. His idea of the curriculum includes rhythm and balance. Like the other theorists he recognised staff needed to be trained. His staff were trained to create a nurturing and supportive relationship with the children, while encouraging social awareness and sensitivity to others.

Some points all the mentioned theorists agreed on was play is the most natural effective method of learning. Experimental learning is more effective than directed teaching methods. Early Years staff need training to understand children's needs to effectively support learning, and children from the ages of birth to seven learn at the most rapid rate.

The curriculum today promotes learning through play. Play is broken down into three areas. Imaginary, creative and play. I am going to look very closely at the resources used in my workplace that enhance these methods of play. I will look at the year two children's resources. I will then evaluate which resources cover these three areas of play.

Imaginary Play is used in our literacy lounge, puppets are provided for the children. The children play in small groups sometimes reading books associated with the puppets. Often at other times the children create their own characters. They re-enact stories from the books. They imagine their puppets as characters and add their own voices and use their own interpretation of the characters. The children also make up

their own stories or imitate others. An example of this would be one child's puppet plays teacher while the others are pupils. This type of imitating is called symbolic play. Children may play in solitary with the puppets and take on many characters using vast imaginative skills. Turn taking and sharing is enhanced while playing in the literacy lounge. The storylines can be planned together. This reinforces good interaction and communication skills. Motor skills are used while giving the puppets movement, whether a hand or finger puppet. The children also improve on reading skills. An adult would always read the books to the children as a group so even poor readers understand the story before playing with the puppets. The adult will use different books and puppets per term rotating the resources to prevent boredom. The adult may pass on suggestions and ideas.

We also provide an office in which the children play in during their literacy time. This includes a computer, telephone, whiteboard, paper and pens. The children often role-play in the office imitating the school secretary or a doctor's receptionist. They learn how to use the telephone correctly often from one another. An adult can ask children to think about 'what are offices used for in different businesses. 'What might the computer be used for in a school?' 'How do you think our secretary might answer the telephone?' The adult may need to intervene when there is conflict between children. He/she may suggest ideas to resolve a problem. The children enhance many skills while in the office. Communication and interaction are learned, familiarity with everyday objects and learn their uses. Writing and reading skills are developed. Motor skills and new vocabulary learned.

We also have many programmes on the computers based on fantasy situations and creating storyboards. The children learn keyboard skills, mouse skills, and word recognition. Adults may intervene with questions 'Would Biff wear a hat and gloves to go play in the sun?' 'What other items of furniture may go in the kitchen?' Often children print out computer work and their body language obviously suggests a huge amount of self-esteem.

Physical play includes equipment used in the hall and in the playground. There is pull out apparatus with bars for crawling under and bars for climbing over and up. It has large hoops built within the frame that can be crawled through. Ropes are suspended that can be climbed. We have a range of different sizes and weight balls. Some for football, some for throwing and catching. We have hoops for all sorts of physical activities e.g. skipping with and using as a hula-hoop. The children also spend a lot of time outdoors during P.E. and play. Our playground is very well equipped with equipment for physical play. We have a tarmac football pitch. We have tall wooden posts shaped and painted as pencils set out so the children can weave in and out. They also use the posts to climb. We have a wooden ship and a wooden train these can be used to climb and sit on but more usually used in fantasy play. The dinosaur set within a barked area is a favourite. It consists of three half tyres upright from the ground, set about two feet apart. The children climb on them, crawl underneath and jump from tyre to tyre. A well-used piece of equipment to enhance balance are the balancing beams. They are set about one foot off the floor for safety. There are three in total with small wooden steps up to each beam. It is very easy to watch the children's physical development as they move through each of the three year groups. Foundation children arrive with little or no sense of balance. They find the beams very challenging but have the opportunity to use them daily. By the time the children get to year two most children are able to complete each beam with perfect balance, some even running along the beams. We also have grass sledges with wheels, bikes and trikes. Push along wheels, skipping ropes and weaving cones

are usually brought out during P.E lessons under stricter supervision than playtimes. The children learn many skills such as co-ordination e.g. hand – foot coordination and hand – eye coordination. They learn to move in different ways, crawling, running, jumping and walking. They learn to understand space and direction and the forces such as pushing and pulling. Children need to take turns and learn how to resolve conflicts. Communication with other children will be used throughout many physical activities. Rhythm can be learned and they soon learn the difference between hard and soft. While using big foam cubes and building towers numeracy skills will be enhanced. Self-confidence and personal achievement will be gained through physical play although frustration may precede this. Adults will need to supervise all areas of physical play thoroughly as accidents can result in this type of play. Frustration may lead to conflict and the adult will have to step in and maybe offer a suggestion to the child suggesting another activity they know the child can achieve. Adults can suggest different ways of movement and suggest speeds/ tempo. New vocabulary can be used by the adult and work to encourage the children to use the same.

Creative Play is used in many ways throughout year two. We have the obvious paper, pencils pens and crayons available at all times via pots on units. The children also have many computer programmes that allow creativity through art, programmes such as the Paint programme and Dazzle. These programmes allow the children to create very professional looking pictures which can include clip-art. Music and digital photography programmes are used with support. Creative work is produced during design and technology lessons, these include making bags which involves cutting and sewing. Paper crafts are created using folding techniques and cutting. They also create painted masks and make vehicles using old boxes and recycled rubbish. The paints and scissors are only available to the children during more structured lessons. Bookshelves are stacked with construction toys in boxes. These are all within reach of the children. During free choice time the children can use any construction toys. We have a sand tray which is always available to the children. This includes shells and seashore objects. One of our classrooms also has a music corner with instruments for the children to play, either individually or as a group. All instruments all labelled and we have musical vocabulary words on the walls. The school run a dance club for all year groups. The children use creative expression with movement to produce dance productions. During P.E sessions dance is also covered. During our creative art sessions the children are given the choice to use their own expression with their work. The children build confidence and their self esteem grows. This is a good way for children to show creative expression and a good way for the adults to understand the child. Adults do need to support children with some activities to prevent accidents. Ideas and suggestions are also given. This can prompt the child but encourage them to use their own ideas as well. Through creative play children learn fine motor skills. Through adult intervention they learn new vocabulary. Creative play can teach children colour recognition, organisation, investigation skills, measuring, texture, communication and interaction skills. Many years ago children were taught in a much different manner. Many children did not even have the opportunity to attend schools, as education was never thought of as important. Children that did attend were taught in a very regimented environment. Desks would be laid out in rows with a teacher's desk facing the children centrally. Often children would be too small for the chairs and their feet would not even touch the floor. Learning was thought to be achieved by using repetition. Children would repeat parrot fashion rhymes, verses and times tables. Children would be in mixed

age group classes and taught as a whole. There was no training of the staff to learn how to recognise children's developmental stages. Staff on the whole were females who wanted to work with children. No formal qualifications were needed, as the job of teacher was not held in very high regard. The theorists of the likes of Steiner, Montessori and Freoble were not accepted then as they are now and very little attention was paid to their ideas. It is only when governments realised the importance of children receiving a good education that any of their ideas have been put into practice. Early years staff are now being trained to a much higher standard and the teaching profession has a very thorough training background. Teaching is now recognised as a highly skilled job. Our society today also realise how important education is and many believe children should be sent to early years settings to begin education.

In my opinion in an ideal world children should be allowed to stay at home until the age of seven. Children do learn through play and would benefit from a secure home environment with a positive and caring carer offering opportunities to play. Children should be able to play outside, getting dirty and wet and being able to change into dry clothes when their outdoor play is finished. Schools are not able to offer this and on wet days, our school children will spend six hours without fresh air. Unfortunately today's society is unsafe for children to roam free, playing in fields and running through woods. Children are kept secure in homes and fenced in, in their gardens. This limits the amount of time they can spend with other children and limits the ability to make new friends. School does offer this opportunity but in a more structured way. Many foreign countries do not make school compulsory until the age of seven. Research suggests that these children are on a academic level by the time they are eleven, compared to the children who start school at four or five. I believe parents should be given the option of waiting until their child is seven until starting compulsory education,.