

The Role Of The Adult In Extending Children's Play

Many children play happily and spontaneously for long periods when they have ready access to activities and materials. But that does not mean that there is no role for adults. Practitioners and parents do in fact have an important part to play.

To assist children in concentrating for longer on what they are doing, the presence of an adult - not directing operations, nor monopolising the conversation or teaching, but simply being there - gives the support and stability children need to get really absorbed in the job at hand. Children are helped by seeing an adult close by who is willing to share an experience and who obviously enjoys the materials being played with. This gives extra comfort and security, particularly to younger children, and it can also be a learning experience for parents that are present, who might not know about such things. Having observed the children's pleasure as they play, parental involvement can be promoted by further guidance so that they can offer the same experience at home.

What children get out of activities is greatly influenced by what practitioners put in. First the practitioners provide a rich range of resources, chosen to promote the learning outcomes they want for the children. For example, if they want the children to have practice in selecting an appropriate tool for the job, they will provide a range of paints and brushes and invite the children to discuss what to paint and what equipment will work best. However, that is not the end of their role. Close observation over a period of time as practitioners *Look, Listen and Note* (Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage, Early Education 2012) will reveal the child's present skills and interests and will be a guide to what might be offered next. Children's learning is not restricted by subject boundaries; while they are enjoying the opportunities of the activity they are engaged in, they are expanding their skills and understanding in the prime and specific areas of learning. An awareness of this helps the child's key person to plan; organising resources within the setting to meet the needs they have identified through their observation of individual children.

Formative or on-going assessment is integral to the learning and development process. It involves practitioners (usually the child's key person) observing children to gain an understanding of their level of achievement, interests and learning styles. This in turn leads to learning experiences that are shaped to each child and further informed by feedback from parents and other adults.

The relaxed and friendly atmosphere generated as children play provides the adults with opportunities to:

- *Be there:* For some children, getting damp or dirty is troublesome, with an emphasis instead, on keeping clean and tidy. Very young ones especially may need the constant presence of an adult just to reassure them that what they are doing is 'all right'. Sometimes, if young children are too timid to play, an adult can help by acting as a model, not busily making and doing things, but offering an example of the earliest stage of play: patting damp sand into shape by hand, or running fingers through dry sand and water.
- *Be aware:* Other children are often drawn as spectators around messy play activities. Some of them want to watch for a while before deciding to join in. Others really want to play, but cannot quite take the first step. They need to have it made easy for them by a word of encouragement, a space created in the home corner and perhaps the offer from a selection of clothing.
- *Listen:* Children often talk as they play, either to themselves about the feelings and experiences they are expressing, or to an adult who keeps them company as they work. Adults can learn a great deal as they listen to the children's perceptions of their lives and experiences. This can enable practitioners to set appropriate targets for children and to offer them the most helpful resources, in this and other areas of activity. Learn by listening about the way the children see things, about what is important to them, and, occasionally, about what may be troubling them.
- *Talk:* The pleasure and relaxation of sand and water play may make some children ready to talk. The adult with them can help them think about their experiences by offering, when the time is right, the words which can name and describe them. Children who have difficulty in expressing themselves in language often find release in play with natural materials. It can make them more willing to attempt speech if a receptive adult is at hand.
- *Introduce vocabulary:* As children make-believe, the adults with them can ensure that they are introduced to and helped to use the vocabulary which belongs with the activity: words that express their feelings of frustration or joy; the names of the pieces of equipment they are using; the words they need to explain their plans for expanding on and/or involving other children in their play and to review their success when the work is done. Adults can help children practise the 'give and take' of conversation.
- *Share:* Children who are hesitant in speech or slow to settle in the group, and those who find it hard to behave, often benefit if they can build up an individual relationship with one adult. Engaged side by side in a soothing, undemanding activity, adult and child have a shared experience on which to base a friendship.

- *Add:* A watching adult can see when children need a new idea, a suggestion or a question in order to help the play to move on: “*I like the boats you’ve made, how could you get them to move?*” It is one thing to be ready, if a child is absorbed in squeezing water out of a piece of sponge and watching it seep out again, to talk about weight and absorption; it is quite a different thing for the practitioner to be determined to talk about those things regardless of the children’s immediate experiences and interests. Building on the children’s own play is not at all the same thing as the adult directing operations from the outside.

- *Observe:* For children, the process they follow during an activity is at least as important as the product; sometimes more so. For this reason, there is a limit to the judgements adults can make about a child’s play by just looking at the end product. You cannot help children on to the next stage unless you are clear about what they have already done, as well as where they are now. Brief frequent records (*Look, Listen, Note*) of what the children are doing, what stage they have reached, how long they can concentrate and how far they have developed in selecting and using equipment, will help to determine what they are offered next. It is also important to understand what you see when you observe a child if they are to progress and gain long-term satisfaction. For example, as they play with sand and water, children move through a series of stages. From just gently splashing the water, they go on to scooping it up, pouring it out, then to scooping it up and pouring it with increasing accuracy into another container, filling the container without letting it overflow. Later on, they progress to using these new skills as a means to an end. The observant adult needs to be aware of each individual child’s progress, to recognise when the child needs to be left alone to perfect a skill by repetition and when they need help in moving on to the next stage.

- *Respect:* Children’s view of their activities is often modelled on adult attitudes to them. If adults take the children’s creative work seriously, the children will do the same. This means that they are more likely to concentrate longer, achieve results which satisfy them better and be motivated to try again. One way of showing an active interest in the children’s work is to ask them questions about it. However, this has to be done carefully. Questions such as “*What is it?*” imply that wooden sculpture ought to ‘be’ something, and can undermine children’s confidence, especially if what they have produced was not intended to be representational. A more general invitation to “*Tell me about it*” can be more helpful, or a positive remark about one part of the sculpture, such as “*I like that shape there*”.

- *Introduce skills:* Children are not free to be creative if they do not have sufficient skills to make full use of the resources available. Children need carers to help them find the best way to select materials for their play and/or choose the right tool for the job.

- *Introduce adult art:* Children need to know that the activities they are offered are not just for children. Adults also read, write, use mathematics and the techniques of science, play and listen to music, and paint. Excellent prints of paintings are easy to obtain, or you could visit a local art gallery. Adults will then need to encourage children to find words to talk about what they see.
- *Keep records:* A broad range of evidence is required to create a full picture of a child's achievements and to ensure that their learning and development needs are being met. It is important to keep a record of the stages through which each child's work passes. A series of photographs, kept together in a book, provides a useful ongoing record, alongside other evidence, that helps to build a picture of the child's learning journey.

Practitioners need to find a balance when involving themselves in children's activities. They must ensure they do not 'push' their own ideas at the children, but are ready to give extra help or stimulus when needed. By observing carefully, adults will be able to recognise:

- The child who, absorbed in a fascinating new experience, needs to be left alone to play through it, repeating the same procedure as many times as necessary.
- The child who is repeating the same procedures because she is 'stuck' and needs a word of encouragement, a discussion of the project in hand, a practical suggestion or the introduction of new materials to get moving again.
- The child who, faced with a problem, is working through a range of possible approaches, perhaps making rather a mess in the process.
- The child who, faced with the same problems, has exhausted their own resources and needs discreet adult help to ward off frustration and/or despair.
- Children whose play is perfectly happy, but could take on a richer, more satisfying dimension with a little extra adult input.

No activity should be regarded as an end in itself. Practitioners must constantly be alert for ideas or interests of the children which can be taken up in other ways, and find ways in which these can be enhanced. Consider a visit to the library to look at books and posters about dinosaurs if the children have spent a morning inventing clay monsters. It can be tempting for adults to make models with the clay and dough, but it is important not to do this; instead to watch and listen, while rolling or patting a spare piece of dough, ready to pick up and extend the children's own ideas.