

## **Schemas – children's learning styles**

You ask a child to stop - to be careful - to clear up her muddle ... but she doesn't seem to hear you. The child just carries on throwing or playing on the doorstep or emptying all the toy boxes. We all know a child who prefers the box to the toys! We have all observed a 1 year old who stands for ages watching water rolling down the window - but flutters between other activities like a little butterfly. There are 2 / 3 year old children all over the country who wrap up their dolls and push them up and down the garden.

Schemas are not new! They have been around forever. They describe repeated patterns of play - repetitive behaviour - when a child does something over and over and over and over again. The child seems compelled to repeat the play - no amount of encouragement will stop them. They are not being naughty when they play in this way - they cannot help themselves - they are far too busy learning to stop and wonder if what they are doing might be dangerous.

### **Keeping children safe**

If you risk assess and you feel that the play is too risky - to the child, your television (!) or other adults and children in the room, experts advise that the child is provided with opportunities to continue learning in safe spaces. For example...

- If the child is throwing and someone might get hurt (or something get damaged) then take them outside to throw or provide them with a pre-prepared basket of soft balls, bean bags and rolled up paper... and find other activities they will enjoy such as splattering paint and playing with moving water.
- If the child is fascinated by water and you are concerned they might be at risk of drowning, risk assess everything, especially in the garden and make sure they cannot come to harm in standing water when unsupervised. You can also extend their interest by supervising them to use a hose pipe or providing a water tray and wheel.
- If the child empties toy boxes and you are concerned other children might trip over toys and get hurt, put boundaries in place so they know what can be emptied and what is dangerous. They can often be guided to a cosy corner to continue their play - a selection of cuddly toys can be emptied and filled as many times as the child wishes without other adults or children coming to any harm - so when you see them starting to tip guide them to their corner and the safe toys and explain what you are doing and why.
- If the child is constantly spinning round and round in circles and you are concerned about them falling over and hurting themselves, take them outside and ask them to spin on the grass. They might also enjoy playing with spinning tops and other things that go round and round and singing and dancing to circle songs.

- We've all cared for a child who climbs up everything - often with disastrous consequences. We know that the child cannot be stopped so we put barriers in place to protect them such as safety gates and we are constantly on our guard, strapping them safely in the high chair or buggy if we have to leave the room - because we know within seconds they will be standing on the table or trying to get over the back of the sofa. We also need to plan lots of safe climbing into their days - at the park, in the garden and at soft play so they are allowed to follow their schema in a safe, controlled environment. It is usually best to keep ratios low when taking a child who is compelled to climb on everything to the park!
- If the child picks up random toys, puts them in a bag and carries them around - dropping them rather than playing with them - leaving piles of toys for others to trip over - you might have to follow them around for a few weeks ... or as long as the schema lasts. Meanwhile, make tidying up fun - put on some music and dance or make up a silly tidy up song... and play shopping games with them to teach them that the toys they are choosing can be used in other ways.
- If you have a group of children who want to play sword fighting you will need to consider your own feelings on the subject and talk to parents about their views. You might find that if you stop them from playing they will simply do it in a hidden area of the garden and hurt each other because they are not supervised - so it can be better to tackle it head on - here are some safe swords, you can play in this area, only 2 children can play the game at a time and you must be supervised... the book 'We don't play with guns here' by Penny Holland is a good read.

Even with safe boundaries in place children might forget sometimes and need encouragement and support to stay safe. It's not their fault they are learning in this way and they should not be punished for exploring and playing. They are not being anti social or rude - they are simply focused and engrossed in their learning.

### **Linking schemas to the EYFS**

Schemas link throughout the Early Years Outcomes (Development Matters) and schemas are very closely linked to the Characteristics of Effective Learning (COEL). By supporting a child's schema you are telling them that it is good to explore and find out and follow their own play.

**Areas of learning** - the main link is normally 'Understanding the World' - the world - children are learning through their exploration of the world around them. There will then be further links depending on what they are doing. For example -

- Throwing = physical development - moving
- Lining things up = maths - learning about size and shape
- Jumping up and down = physical development - moving
- Hiding in boxes and under blankets = understanding the world - the world
- Filling, emptying and carrying = physical development - moving
- Turning taps and knobs = physical development - handling

- Playing with water = maths - capacity and weight
- Walking in straight lines = physical development - moving

You will find that a lot of schemas link to children's physical development.

**Characteristics of effective learning** - children usually concentrate very well when they are learning through their schema. They will play for much longer than normal. Schemas usually link to the COEL playing and exploring - and describe the child's engagement in activities.

### **Schemas and working with parents**

Once you have recognised a child's current schema or learning style, you can chat to parents about it and explain more fully what their child is learning. You can then work together to put boundaries in place at home and while the child is with you - so they can enjoy their play but learn that, to keep themselves and others safe, they need to use safe spaces and sometimes need adult support.

### **Types of schemas**

There are lots of different schemas - you can find out more online (links to follow) and the book 'Again, again' by Sally Featherstone is a good place to go for more information.

The earliest schema is often trajectory - it is also one of the easiest to recognise. It is when children throw things around the room, line things up, are fascinated watching water and anything that moves in a straight line.

Other easily observed schemas include -

- **Enclosing** - the child loves playing hide and seek and draping blankets over themselves. Next steps might be to make dens with them or put up a tent so they can hide and play inside. Let the sit under the table for story time and make a cosy corner with them enclosed by cushions.
- **Orientation** - the child looks at the world from different angles. They might enjoy mirror play, turning upside down and being given lots of space to roll and tumble.
- **Positioning** - the child loves lining things up. Provide collections of small toys they enjoy playing with such as dinosaurs or farm animals and surfaces so they can leave their lines in place and come back to them (they often get quite cross if other children remove toys from their lines). A child with a positioning schema will often make complex towers and patterns with blocks as well - grab a quick photo in case it is knocked down to show you value their creation.
- **Rotation** - the child spins round and round. They will enjoy drawing circles on round paper, making spirals and snail patterns, spinning tops, watching toys going round and round etc. A rotation schema child will often love doing peg jigsaws, sometimes when they are older and have 'grown out of' this type of puzzle - simply because they can turn the pieces round and round.

- **Transporting** - the child carries bags, baskets and boxes around with toys inside. The carrying is more important than the toys. Extension activities include a buggy or trolley to move things around in the garden, buckets for carrying sand and soil and a tipper truck in the sand tray.

You should be able to provide support for children's schemas through your continuous provision resources but if you spot a child following a type of play and you do not have any toys or games for them, you might need to think laterally - what can you borrow? The schema might not go on for long...

As they grow children will explore different schemas - why not read up on it and you will be able to spot them! They are great fun!

### **Finding out more information**

There are lots of documents and websites on the internet if you want to find out more -

- [http://www.murielgreen.herts.sch.uk/documents/schemas\\_coffeemorning\\_march2011.pdf](http://www.murielgreen.herts.sch.uk/documents/schemas_coffeemorning_march2011.pdf)
- <http://susan.sean.geek.nz/Schemas%20in%20Areas%20of%20Play.pdf>
- <http://www.aucklandplaycentreshop.co.nz/articles-learning-play/Article/schemas-play.html>
- <http://lucy-locket.com/schema.html>
- E-book 32 'Schemas' from Knutsford Childminding - £3.99