Helping Children to be Competent Learners
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Helping Children to be Competent Learners

From Birth to Three

Ann Roberts and Avril Harpley
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Appendix: The Birth to Three Framework for ‘A Competent Learner’
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Ann and Avril
Introduction

Helping children to become competent learners can provide them with a positive disposition for lifelong learning and be the catalyst in germinating the seed that is their potential. The early years from 0 to 3 are a unique period in a young child’s life as he encounters experiences for the very first time. It can be a confusing, even chaotic time, when he is trying to make sense of the world, testing out ideas, making connections and discovering how and where he fits in. Young children are naturally curious, inquisitive, they like to explore and experiment and in this way, they make their own discoveries and draw conclusions.

Everything a child experiences has a direct influence on the development of the brain and the emotions. Throughout life learning is the process of adjusting information and knowledge, changing one set of beliefs and concepts in the light of new discoveries. Initially learning is through the senses and is mainly physical and practical, or ‘hands on’. It is active, playful and is strengthened by the emerging interaction with their peers and significant adults. Later, children develop the impulse to record their experiences through representation and language. To the untrained eye early mark making appears to be random scribbles and lines but they represent a child’s inner drive and intention, a need to record feelings and experiences. These marks develop into forms of communication that encompass symbols and drawings. Children observe the behaviour of adults and their peers. They imitate what they see and learn as they re-enact familiar situations during role play yet have the security of being able to maintain control of the outcome.

This book uses the framework of Birth to Three Matters (DfES, 2002) and adds to it some effective everyday suggestions of activities which parents and carers can try with their baby or toddler. Every child is unique and some children develop their speech at different rates. Adults need to act as interested enablers and through acknowledging and encouraging children they will engender confidence. These are the intentions behind the activities and suggestions for children.

In this book the activities are based around easily accessible everyday items in order to encourage practitioners to use these objects to support and reflect the home environment within the setting. Simple role-play opportunities, such as using boxes and cloths, encourage open-ended play and exploration, enabling children to
communicate what is in their mind. Imagination, creativity and language are all interconnected.

By posing challenges and questions to staff, readers are invited to reflect on their own practice and think about how they can communicate more effectively with babies and toddlers and assist their developing skills.

**Why should we help children to become competent learners?**

The purpose of this book is to help practitioners consider ways in which they can provide support and encourage babies and young children to become competent learners. There are four sections: making connections, representing, being creative and being imaginative. These refer to the government’s *Birth to Three Matters* guidelines.

The quality of the adults who work with young children and babies is key to their successful development. They too need to be competent learners who are committed to professional development and open to ideas. Working with babies and young children is an area where the adult observes and follows rather than leads and directs. In this way, activities are initiated by the interests of the child and developed by the skill of the practitioner. Their role demands that they are both carers and educators who have to take into account the safety and protection of the children. Yet this should not prevent them from providing rich and varied experiences within a stimulating and inviting environment, both indoors and outdoors.

A sensitive practitioner recognises that young children need to be independent, at times insisting on doing things for themselves yet at other times needing support, encouragement and reassurance.

> Never let a child risk failure until he has a reasonable chance of success.

(Dr Maria Montessori, [www.montessori.org.uk/MMQuotations.php](http://www.montessori.org.uk/MMQuotations.php))

Effective practitioners develop respectful two-way relationships with parents and carers. In their role as significant adults, they have to be non-judgemental and without prejudice as they may have a profound influence over what the children in their care value and believe. They have a unique opportunity to help each child develop his learning potential and be confident as an individual.

**How to use this book**

This book has been written with a practical focus in mind. Practitioners need ideas to use with babies and toddlers. They are busy people and have limited resources at their disposal. The connections made with *Birth to Three Matters* at the beginning of each chapter are designed to support them as they plan and use the documents on a daily basis.
After an introduction, each chapter contains six numbered parts, each one subdivided into sections. The first two sections of each part look at babies and toddlers. The baby section covers from 0 to 18 months and the toddlers’ section runs from 18 to 36 months. Both provide practical activities. Obviously, the practitioner will recognise that every child is unique and so adaptations to some of the suggested activities will be necessary. Safety is very important and so cautionary advice is offered throughout the book. If children have specialist needs, readers will need to take these into consideration before using the activities and make an informed safety decision on how to use them in their situation.

Following the activities is a section on the outcomes for the child. The points are designed to help us fully recognise the importance of the child in everything that is offered. If we are intending to help children to become competent learners, we need to assess how well we are doing this from the child’s point of view. Ofsted also focuses on this within its inspection framework and so this will assist the practitioners in their evaluations and their preparation for an Ofsted visit.

The focus points that follow are to make us as adults draw some thoughts and feelings together about the practical activities, their purpose, the impact they have and how this can all be built on for the child. They are intended to encourage the reader to consider, question and reflect.

Staff discussion is important. Talking about what we do and trying to make sense of it with others helps us to improve the quality and standard of our work. If we want children to become competent learners, we need to see how our role is fitting into the overall picture and how effective we are being.

Finally, each chapter concludes with a list of references. These references are linked to three key documents: National Standards for Under 8s Day Care and Childminding (Full Day Care) (DfES/DWP, 2003), Birth to Three Matters (DfES, 2002) and Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003). These are intended to assist the reader in making connections between practice and theory. Chapters 3 and 4 also provide a list of resources which include related books and websites that practitioners might find useful.

References

Introduction

As practitioners can we ever measure the consequences of our involvement with children? Probably not. We are only a part of the many influences working around a child that include the family, culture, the environment, society, politics and opportunities. Children do not enter a setting brand spanking new, gift wrapped, equal and ready to go. However, as Jean Piaget commented, children are born with a drive to make sense of the world.

The components in the *Birth to Three Matters* guidelines for ‘A Competent Learner’ link the experiences that every child needs: social, emotional, physical, intellectual and creative. Children want to explore, investigate, experiment, interact with each other and adults, ask questions, solve problems, use their imagination and represent. To do this they need support and encouragement from skilled adults who know when to jump in and when to stand back.

These early experiences have a real impact on the brain: they affect how the brain is wired and can influence future attitudes and capabilities. A critical part of our role is to help to develop children’s learning potential, build on their natural curiosity and desire to make sense of the world. By providing quality opportunities for first-hand experiences, handling materials and objects, they are able to make connections and develop abstract concepts. The brain stores information in thousands of individual dendrites that resemble the branches of a tree. A rich environment increases the growth of dendrites. When a child sees and tastes his first apple he starts up a long-term file on apples and then as he learns more about apples, he creates associated files. For example, not all apples are the same; those that are green, red, golden or speckled we might store in our colour file, their round shape may be associated with other round objects such as oranges and footballs. The brain stores information in different areas: visual information, rhythm and music prefer to be stored in the right-hand side of the brain whereas verbal input, time, sequence, language and word processing tend to be stored in the left. Young children have in-built bodily memory – it is through repetitive movements that the muscles in their body learn to walk, run and ride a bike.
Since the mid-1990s there have been exciting developments in the understanding of the way children learn. Supporting schemas are seen as a powerful force and provide the most powerful tool for learning where children practise their ideas in a safe environment and consolidate new skills, concepts and thinking. Their thinking is represented through modelling, drawing, painting and role play.

Knowledge can be acquired without having the disposition to use it. (Katz, 1993)

A critical part of the practitioner’s role with young children is to foster a positive attitude towards learning. Some children may have the skills to read but lack the disposition to do so. Just because they can doesn’t mean they will or want to. However, if the practitioner shows visible and positive signs of enjoying reading, the child may wish to imitate them. Enjoyment is not the goal – enjoyment is for entertainers; however, learning should engage the mind of the learner and be a pleasurable and rewarding experience.

1. Connecting ideas and understanding about the world

Young children learn through repeating patterns of play (sometimes called SCHEMA). (Birth to Three Matters)
Babies

Observing how a baby crawls and the repeated patterns she makes as she begins to gain confidence illustrates that babies use repetition to enhance well-being and to consolidate what they are learning about their world. Throwing toys down can be linked to a pattern of schema called the trajectory scheme, whereas repeating circular movements in various ways could indicate or link eventually to a radial schema. However, identifying any patterns of play requires observations skills and knowledge of schemas themselves.

**Practical activities**

- Use a collection of bowls and spoons to encourage stirring round and round.
- Use natural objects, such as butter squash and gourds, which create different patterns of movement and allow crawling and moving after them.
- Use circular mats with circular items on and observe the patterns of play.
- Thread objects such as CDs along a line of ribbon or string so that they can be physically moved back and forward to support schemas.
- Lay out a series of exercise mats on the floor so that babies can crawl backwards and forwards.
- Make a collection of toys that roll and give babies the space to explore them.
- Make simple trails using laminated pictures or simple placemats (the large fruit pictures variety) sealed on the floor, some in circles and some in lines.

Toddlers

Young children systematically explore aspects of their world through abstract ideas such as verticality, connection, transporting and enveloping. These activities link apparently random activities together. They discover many different ways to work through their theme such as expressing it in painting, role play, and construction or asking for favourite stories that embody the schema ideas. When the witch puts Hansel and Gretel in the oven it feeds a child’s enveloping or enclosing schema. It has been suggested that if certain schemas, such as enclosure, are not worked through, abstract concepts such as area or volume are not so easily understood.

Below are a few ideas to support some of the common schemas.

**Practical activities**

- Transporting. Provide a collection of objects together with buckets, bags, baskets and trucks so that children can transport them from place to place and back again.
Enveloping. Children will want to cover themselves and objects with material, paint, even glue. Make available cloths, wrapping paper, boxes with lids, hats and dressing-up clothes, materials for making dens. Find stories to read where characters are wrapped up cosily in bed, climb into things, wear different clothes. This schema can often be recognised when a child paints a picture then covers it over entirely with a layer of colour.

Connecting. This schema shows itself when children want to link, connect or tie things together. They will be drawn to Lego bricks, train tracks and carriages, trucks with trailers, bikes and trailers, tying string and ribbons. In addition you can play games where children hold hands or hold on to each other’s waists.

Ordering. The classic example of this schema is the story of the ‘Three bears’. Children will enjoy putting toy animals into enclosures, arranging them in size, lining up the bikes and later ordering pictures into a logical sequence.

Outcomes for the child

- Motivation to explore and express ideas and concepts.
- Better understanding of the world.

Focus points

To observe a schema try to look beyond the obvious activity and discover the thread that underlies it. Schemas do not appear in any specific order, they do not follow a developmental stage; however, they are easily recognisable in younger children. Sometimes a child may be exploring two different schemas at the same time; often he will join up with another child and play with him while they share the same schema.

Note: schema spotting takes time and this can be a useful project to do as a team, discussing ideas as you go.

Staff discussion

- Observe children during free play and note their schema. Discuss with staff if other children have the same one and make provision to support. For example, if vertical or horizontal schemas are being explored, provide torches to shine straight lines, blocks to build towers, construction equipment, rail tracks, grids or aeroplane toys. Their independent mark making may show examples of vertical and horizontal lines and letters such as T, H, L, I or X.
2. Connecting through the senses and movement

Young babies use movement and sensory exploration to connect with their immediate environment.

*(Birth to Three Matters)*

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**Babies**

Babies’ early movements begin with stretching and extending out into their new world. Once they are mobile, their crawling movements tend to be forward and in a linear pattern. Going upstairs is much easier than coming down, moving forward is easier than backwards. Different bodily techniques are used. They crawl and explore their world using touch as a key sense. They also follow circular patterns and this can be found in early mark-making ‘scribbles’. Moving allows connections to happen and learning to begin.

**Practical activities**

- Collect items that roll in different directions, and if possible, use natural materials such as gourds or butter squash. These create haphazard movements...
and challenge movement patterns. This combines the sense of sight and movement stimulation.

- Choose some simple black and white pictures and laminate them. Place them on the floor in different pattern trails, swapping between straight lines and curves for variety.
- Use a circular mat and a circular basket with items in it which can roll and, if possible, have sounds in such as sound balls (unused cat toys/collars are good for this but check for safety!) or musical instruments. Combine sound and movement.
- Collate some songs that have related movements, such as ‘Round and round the garden’ – linking the sense of touch and movement.

**Toddlers**

Toddlers reach a stage where they wish to be independent – the ‘me do it’ time. It can get messy when they explore paint, dough, sand and water; however, a crucial part of learning is being able to handle new materials freely, finding out how they work and what they can do with them. There is often a spurt in learning followed by a lull, while the body and the mind adjust to the new learning. You will find that some children will want to repeat activities many times just for enjoyment but also to master a skill. They need encouragement to show approval and to build up self-esteem and confidence.

**Practical activities**

- Finger and toe painting. Use wallpaper lining paper so that the children can walk along in their bare feet, covered in paint. Ensure you have a bowl of water and a towel nearby for those children who dislike being ‘messy’. Different forms of mark making help to develop hand–eye co-ordination. Hand and feet printing connects mark making with language/symbols.
- Dancing with ribbons and scarves helps a toddler to use larger arm movements and gain better control.
- Spinning and circle play. Place ropes on the ground in a spiral shape for children to walk upon or beside. Encourage spinning, twirling and circle games. Current research suggests that this helps brain development and balance.
- Provide a variety of construction toys that have to be pushed together and pulled apart. Have sponges in the water tray to squeeze and dough that can be pulled, stretched, rolled and kneaded to make shapes. These activities will develop muscles in the wrists and hands.
• Trying to capture a slippery ice-cube in the water tray and having fun in a fluid environment also helps to strengthen hands and fingers. Provide tip and pour activities with different sized bottles and funnels. A household sieve will make a shower of water to trickle gently over arms and hands.

Outcomes for the child

• Learning and senses are seamlessly integrated.
• Learning experiences are linked to first-hand investigations.
• Development of hand–eye co-ordination and strengthening of muscles.

Focus points

Once a baby is around six months old she is able to sit up and take an interest in the world. The trunk or core of the body develops first, then she can control her arms and legs and later fingers and toes.

By two and a half she can engage in energetic play, run, dance, spin and stretch using all of her body.

Planned activities should focus on movement and learning in the early years. Consider the level of movement available when presenting activities.

Caution: Inquisitive babies and toddlers find and pick up the most amazing and often very small objects. Monitor their discoveries carefully. Be aware of cushions, pillows that could smother a young baby and ribbons and cords that could get caught in fingers and toes. Double check the size of objects that might be mouthed or swallowed and choke a baby.

Staff discussion

• How much space do we allow children to have between activities such as in a baby room? Encouraging physical movement from activity to activity needs to be evaluated – too far and a child may not attempt it; too close and it may be overwhelming. Discuss room layouts.
3. Finding out about the environment and other people

As they become more mobile, babies connect with toys, objects and a wider group of people.

(Birth to Three Matters)

Babies

Once mobility occurs, the view of the world experienced by a baby on her tummy – which is about 9 inches in height – increases. Crawling and walking increases her levels of vision and the distance of the exploration area. Even venturing out in a buggy and/or a car seat extends the environment.

Other people's faces begin to fascinate babies as well as their own reflections in mirrors. Once mobility develops connections begin to expand and their purpose and involvement with toys changes. The world a baby operates in is growing and presents new challenges; experiences of meeting new people and discovering new objects. She learns to connect with them and understand what they can do.

Adults need to be sensible and recognise that even young babies have likes and dislikes. Not all babies like balloons or clowns for instance. They find them very frightening. It is important to observe and monitor areas of apprehension and discuss them to establish a possible source or reason. If a child gets distressed over something, it is important that the staff team know and respect this.
Practical activities

- Collect photographs of faces and put them in a photo album. Include the babies' parents/carers if possible – if black and white pictures are used, it will be easier for the baby to recognise her loved ones.
- Make a montage of faces with old and young people from different races and laminate it. Include the pictures of the babies in the room and the key workers. Put these on a low level where the babies crawl and can look at them.
- The environment must include the outside – the babies need to experience the outside world. Ensure that they have warm clothing and also effective protection on hot days so they can experience the outdoors. Put up mirrors, at buggy height, so that they can go out and be pushed along and see, hear and touch things. Plan a baby sensory area.
- A baby's environment should be at different levels – some floor and tummy time, seated time or crawl/walk time as well as some different surfaces. Their environment is as imaginative as that of others who play with them.

Toddlers

A child who is able to relate easily to others and can communicate clearly has a better chance of having his needs met and will develop positive relationships in the future. Social competence develops from experiencing positive interactions and the knowledge that others are caring and supportive. However, those children who have had the experience that the world is a frightening place and that adults cannot be trusted will need a very sensitive and caring approach. In order to feel confident enough to explore the wider world children need to make strong bonds with significant adults who they can trust, have an awareness of others' feelings, be able to say 'no' and take the initiative. They need to develop acceptable behaviour through an awareness of, and an ability to adjust to, social conventions and expectations.

Practical activities

- Provide regular outdoor play and activities so that the children can experience the natural world and the elements first hand: feeling the wind, the rain and the sun, smelling the earth after rain and listening to the sounds around them. In this way they will begin to learn about the changing seasons, birds and butterflies, observe the growth and decay of plants.

Caution: Make sure the children have suitable clothing and some spares to change into if they get wet or dirty.
Explore ways to widen children’s understanding of the wider world by introducing a variety of visitors to the setting. These may include local tradespeople or workers within the community such as the fire, police and ambulance services or family members who wish to share experiences with the children. Prepare the visits carefully and introduce the visitor and his/her reasons for visiting. Teach the children the social conventions of polite behaviour and greeting. Build up a collection of photographs and videos together with songs and music that show the diversity of race, culture and lifestyle within the community.

Ensure that children are aware of the safe boundaries within the setting and outside. Walk with them and point these out. Create a road safety game with traffic cones; teach the symbols, signs and awareness of traffic for safer crossings.

Select a soft toy as a special friend that can be taken home by children for ‘sleepovers’. Encourage families to include this toy in their daily life, their holidays and outings, taking photos and keeping a diary. Later, on their return to the setting, ask the children to share these experiences with the group. Extend this activity by keeping a simple map of the local area, or if appropriate, the wider world, to plot the journeys the toy has made.

Provide equipment that allows the children to examine the world from different viewpoints such as digital microscopes, magnifying lenses or telescopes. Let them discover where different mini beasts live, how they move and what they eat.

Outcomes for the child

- Children understand their world and how far it extends.
- Growing awareness of nature and the changing seasons.
- Increased confidence and more secure relationships.

Focus points

Regular outdoor play is an essential part of a young child’s development; however, if outdoor space is limited, explore possibilities of visiting local parks or woodland, organise walks around the block or contact local schools to see if you can share their playing field.

Sensitive adults will anticipate situations that could prove difficult for shy, reserved children by allowing them to take their time, stay close to a significant
adult and prompt them gently to initiate being friendly and joining in with others. Those children who have suffered from multiple transitions from an early age may find it difficult to trust a new carer or stranger; they have already experienced lost friendships. They need very careful preparation for change.

Staff discussion

- Do you have sufficient suitable clothing available for children to play outside, whatever the weather?
- Do staff provide positive role models for social interactions?
- Are there simple rules to encourage good behaviour, politeness and good manners?
- Do you have strategies to help new children become integrated into the group?
- Are there clear, simple rules for security, limits and boundaries?

4. Playfully engaged and involved

Follow personal interests and make connections.

*(Birth to Three Matters)*
Babies

Babies are unique beings and are little people in their own right. Their interests grow and develop day by day. They are beginning to build up their personality and interest from very early on and when a group of babies are together this becomes noticeable, certainly to an astute key person who spends time with them. It is important to establish their interests as with older children – it is only then that you can communicate, provide and encourage growth with true understanding. Providing a stimulating and varied environment and observing the responses of individual babies will help to gather evidence of interests and see connections actually happening.

Practical activities

- Once you have spotted a key interest provide a small treasure basket with a lid on it. Put a photograph on this to denote which baby it belongs to. Place inside a collection of things she connects with.
- With the help of parental information build on interests and provide photographs and new artefacts to develop them.
- Provide resources such as lengths of voile and netting cloths for child to play and make their own connections from.
- Provide large tubes and cylinders and allow babies to engage in their chosen way of playing in a free floor space.
- Collect photos when children engage in their own individual interests. This has purpose and provides information – it is when a baby is saying ‘This is me!’
- Provide new items to encourage new interests such as collections of mirrors and shiny items.

Toddlers

Play is a powerful tool for learning. It provides opportunities for social, emotional, intellectual and physical development. Play comes out of the mind of the player rather than the object he plays with. A child transforms the objects to be what he needs at the time. It allows him to construct meaning out of the everyday events in his life. Play brings the big wide world down to a size that a child can cope with and control or walk away from. In a playful situation a child can safely explore frightening ideas, thrilling and exciting games. During play a child will investigate, experiment, organise ideas, solve problems and develop relationships with his peers.
### Practical activities

- Provide a wide variety of materials so that the children can construct dens, build landscapes in the sand tray or create underwater worlds in the water tray.
- Observe children role playing and extend the play by intervening and introducing a new event or materials. For example, the postman has delivered a letter with some exciting news, a magic seed has been discovered, a strange egg has appeared, there is an emergency and everyone is needed to help bandage and care for patients, a colourful mask brings in a new player.
- Observe role play and intervene by removing some of the equipment. For example, the play house cooker needs to be repaired – where can you get a plumber? The office photocopier won’t work – what can you do? The mobile phone battery has run – down how can you get a message home? Allow the children to come up with problem-solving ideas.
- Set up an everyday happenings or a scenario. For example, Teddy has lost his ‘comforter’, one of the toy horses has broken a leg. What happens next? What should we do? Make sure resources include materials that reflect the real world so that children can act out their everyday lives: going to the shops, the hairdressers, the chippy, the garage or the car wash. Support play where they may need to act out fears or anxieties in a safe environment such as a visit to the dentist or the hospital.
- Provide a large cardboard box and watch what the children do with it. You can cut holes for windows or doors, paint it, add buttons for the push-button controls of an aeroplane or rocket.
- Create fantasy dens, for example under the sea, at the North Pole, in a jungle. Add to the atmosphere with coloured lights, sound effects and music. Let the children use small world animals and objects to create scenarios and then photograph them, add text to the pictures and create their own story books.

### Outcomes for the child

- Children feel they can be individual and have personal interests.
- Children are empowered and have control over the play.
- Play can meet a child’s needs – social, emotional, cultural, intellectual and physical.
- During play a child can learn at his own level and interest.
Focus points

Sometimes we plan activities for children that may not be what the children are interested in or even need. The saying ‘one size fits all’ is not appropriate. We need to watch, listen and learn, observe the things the children explore, what they construct or draw in order to tune in to their current interests. Observation of children during their play is crucial and shows us how they are experimenting and trying out ideas, interacting with each other and using their imagination as they try to make sense of the world. It helps us to follow their lead, support and encourage their efforts by supplying the right resources and materials. Positive playful situations allow children to make connections between the present and previous experiences and to develop mastery over materials and manipulative skills. It is during play that children practise skills or develop new ones.

Staff discussion

- In a group perhaps one or two children do not display specific interests as clearly as others. How can we tease this out?
- Could we follow an interest as part of our overall plan – or use this collection of interests as the vision for our planned activities much more?
- Do you employ effective methods to get to know the children, their families, any life-changing events that might be taking place?
- Do you join in with children’s play, have fun and relax with them?

5. Making patterns, comparing, categorising, classifying

Provide stimulating materials for young children to match, sort, classify and categorise.

*(Birth to Three Matters)*
Babies

Babies use all their senses to explore. As they mouth objects they discover the qualities of taste and texture. They respond to familiar sounds and faces and link them with pleasurable experiences. Hands and feet discover that some objects slip, fall and roll and then, when they are more mobile, they can make these things happen themselves, pushing, pulling and throwing. Piaget describes this as sensori-motor exploration.

By providing collections of similar items and different unexplored objects their curiosity and brain power will be extended.

Practical activities

- Simple posting boxes encourage babies to match up and test out their spatial awareness. Have a variety of these but recognise that babies often want to repeat an action and use the same toy over and over again. Babies love to put items in and out of containers and by carefully selecting the objects you can start them sorting and classifying early by ensuring only specific things fit into some places.

- Treasure baskets are merely collections of objects. Collect things that are the same – for example, collect items made of wood and use as a single collection to be explored in full and then introduce a new collection, for instance metal or shiny objects.

- Use simple items to start classifications – a tea set with two settings for example. Remember the attributes that adults use for classifying may not be the same for babies or young children. Talk with them to find out why they have chosen to put items together.

- Ensure that baskets, boxes and containers are available frequently for free play as this facilitates early sorting opportunities.

Toddlers

Sorting, grouping and classifying objects will help children to understand the relationships between them. Toddlers enjoy making collections and will usually sort according to one attribute, the quality or property of the object. They may include or reject items for collections if they have the same attribute or are different. Some items may have only one attribute in common that causes a relationship, for example they are all wooden, all shiny, and all small. Young children can only focus on one attribute at a time; however, as they develop they will be able to describe two or more attributes, although when using the material they will keep only one uppermost. Children who have had a great deal of
experience in sorting, classifying, ordering and working out relationships between objects and materials will be forging a good foundation for mathematics.

**Practical activities**

- Go outside and allow children time to look for items to collect. Give them a small container. On return indoors provide clear sticky back paper or empty CD boxes so that they can select and fix their treasure to keep or display. Encourage them to talk about why they have chosen and included the items. Ask them to describe them, wonder what they are for, and create labels for them noting their special qualities. Take note of the attributes that attract each child.

- Use computer software programs that help children recognise and create shapes. Provide three-dimensional resources so that the children can recreate the designs using bricks and blocks. Photograph their constructions. Have paper shapes or collage materials available so that the children can design further patterns and shapes.

- Equip boxes with play materials that go together, for example things for the kitchen, cutlery trays for knives, forks and spoons, tools for play dough, a collection of green items, large and small dinosaurs. Some of these will be the same, others not the same. Observe how the children sort them.

- Hide a selection of toy snakes in the sand tray; include some identical pairs and ask the children to find them and sort them. Observe how they select and sort the snakes.

- Observe the children as they play and note if they are using linear or circular schemas. Encourage the children to explore making linear and circle shapes during dance and movement. Introduce traditional and modern dances where children dance in a line or in a circle. Provide coloured pegs to create washing line patterns or small toy animals that can be lined up.

**Outcomes for the child**

- Developing simple lifting, holding and dropping skills.
- Developing observation skills, linking ideas.
- Organising information by comparing, classifying and describing attributes.

**Focus points**

Think about how in your own life you need the skills of sorting and classifying and how important they are.
They help to make sense of the world and create effective organisation. Consider the resources you use with babies and toddlers. Do you have a wide variety, are there sufficient to give choice, are there too many? How do you present the resources? Are they laid out invitingly, in specific, well-ordered piles or in a heap? How do children react? Think about reasons for purposely combining resources and presenting them in a new or different ways.

Staff discussion

- Review your resources to include a wide variety of interesting objects for sorting and classifying. Collect objects from the natural world such as colourful shells, oddly shaped stones. Introduce old mechanical objects such as clock parts, fabrics with different textures (silky, rough, etc.), patterns and colours.
- Supply sorting boxes, divided dishes or baskets to sort them into.
- Provide good, accessible storage so that collections can be kept. Label the storage with digital photographs of the contents to help children return them easily.

6. Connecting ideas and understanding the world

For some children the world is their home language, family and street.

*(Birth to Three Matters)*
Babies

The world is a complex place for children and they are shaped by their personal experiences and family environment. Many homes have cultural and religious influences which are a key focus in their day-to-day lives and this will affect how their babies see and experience the world. Having respect and regard for these is important in the partnership work that should be going on with the parents/carers and the setting. Babies may be fed or held in a certain way or at certain times there are routines which are upheld. Connecting ideas and understanding the world may require appreciation of others and their world, offering experiences that are wide and open ended and not judgemental. A baby’s world can be a variable place, where people come and go. They may be with a grandparent, childminder, friend as well as in a setting within a single day – never mind in a week. Making positive connections with families will help staff to help the babies make sense of the world.

Practical activities

- Have artefacts and resources that are multicultural. Make a treasure basket in which you put various items from their culture so that they can see familiar objects.
- Avoid tokenism – by all means celebrate festivals but remember cultures and religions are here in the environment all year round. Colouring in printouts for festivals means nothing to a baby. Look beyond the physical activity and evaluate what is being learnt from it.
- Encourage different fruits and foods in snack time. The backgrounds that many children are coming from are rich in diversity so reflect this in their daily experiences.
- Present resources in different ways and allow children time to connect with them – for example, using different sizes and shapes of spoons with imaginative play, in the sand, water or gloop as well as when we eat.

Toddlers

An early years setting needs to take on board all aspects of equal opportunity for every child whether it is related to gender, culture or religion and operate a fully inclusive setting. A basic instinct is to reject what we don’t understand – we are generally frightened of the unfamiliar. Fear and ignorance go hand in hand so it is important that staff develop young children’s knowledge and understanding of the wider world. Children can be shown that one way is not necessarily better or worse than another, just different.
Children need approval, to be liked, make friends and asked around to tea. At this age, it is far more important to be accepted by your peers than learning phonics and numbers. Without good feelings about themselves, learning can be difficult. Adults should aim to present a world in which both sexes, young and old from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, have positive qualities and are capable of dominating the action. No mean task!

**Practical activities**

- Encourage children to share their experiences of special times throughout the year; the food they eat, any special diets, the clothes they wear and the gifts they receive. Replicate aspects of these experiences in pretend play or with small world toys and support the children to represent them through art and craft.
- Build up a resource of world music and encourage the children to play the tapes freely.
- Provide digital video recorders, PDAs (personal digital assistants), digital cameras or audio tapes so that children and their families can record aspects of their family life and share these with the group.
- Have full-length safety mirrors where the children can see themselves. Encourage them to paint or make models of themselves.
- Display positive visual images of both sexes, of ethnic groups and people with disabilities (for example, a wheelchair marathon).
- Collect patterns, fabrics and artefacts from around the world. Do they tell a story?
- Create a Caribbean picnic under an umbrella complete with food tasting, reggae music and posters of beaches. Try out hairstyles, braids and beads.

**Caution:** Limit salt and salty products and sugar. Be aware that nuts can cause choking in young children. Check additives and E numbers on processed foods and biscuits.

**Outcomes for the child**

- Consistency for the child – feeling safe in his world.
- Respect and understanding about his world supports well-being and confidence.
- Developing a feeling of belonging.
Focus points

Connecting with a wider world is about developing positive attitudes as well as provision. Children learn through and from their immediate environment and the people close to them. Once learnt these feelings are hard to change. They absorb the values and beliefs held by significant adults and this will shape their own for the future. Often feelings about gender, ethnicity, ability or disability are deeply held, deeply rooted and adults may behave unconsciously, unaware of any partiality. The younger the children are in your care, the more you need to worry about their feelings and the greater your role in helping them to develop a sense of belonging and positive self-esteem that will help them to reach their full potential. Recognising needs is one element, but ensuring equality is reached is another. Review current policies and their effectiveness, ensure that they are put into practice and staff are positive role models, walking the talk.

Consider how the staff can use their talents and skills. Is there is a diversity among the staff team which is rich in human experience and resources? Discover the whole world of the child and then you can understand how and what he connects with and most importantly why.

Staff discussion

- Understanding a child’s world today is not easy. Having an insight into his background can help. Consider home visiting or time allocated to spend with parents/carers. If an interpreter is needed, try to do this and ensure there is equality of access and opportunity.

- Staff need to look at how they communicate care and education to the outside world. Parents/carers may have widely differing expectations, and ideas that refer back to the experiences they had as a child. Providing this understanding and communicating it in this way can make the babies'/toddlers' world more connected.

- Review resources – stories, songs, rhymes and music – regularly and update. What images are portrayed, how are the characters shown, are the boys all active and the girls passive? Are there images of ethnic minorities, different landscapes, different countries? Providing toys and artefacts from different cultures can help children make the connection between the familiar home and their setting and therefore feel more secure.

- When talking with the children be aware of whom you address questions to, give tasks to, have jokes with, encourage gently or discipline more firmly.
References


References

Introduction


Chapter 1: Making connections


3 Chapter 3: Being creative


Resources
A wide variety of DVDs, books and merchandise on Angelina Ballerina is available at

www.angelinaballerina.com

A selection of dual language books can be found at Mantra Lingua Publishers

(www.mantralingua.com) and Milet Publishers (www.milet.com).

Note


adopted in the UK in 1996, reads as follows: Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
Chapter 4: Being imaginative


Resources

Safety mirrors, made from acrylic, can be purchased from educational suppliers and

DIY stores. Camouflage nets can be sourced from Army Stores or the internet.
Conclusion