



## (Extract from) Caring for under-threes: play

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### In abundance

Play is just as active and essential to learning for babies and toddlers as it is for older children, as Julia Manning-Morton explains

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### Close relationships

Children under three use play as a mirror in which to see themselves from different perspectives and ask questions such as:

- Who am I?
- How does my body work?
- Who might I be?

They are developing their sense of self through their close relationships.

From this perspective, a child's personal, social and emotional development is paramount in plans for their play experiences. The cornerstone of high-quality play provision for under-threes is the quality of their relationships with close adults. They require skilled, committed practitioners who:

- provide appropriately for children's play through the quality of their relationships and the physical and psychological environment
- act as children's guides, supporters and play facilitators
- respond to children's emotional, social, physical, communication and cognitive needs in their chosen play
- work closely with parents and carers in sharing perspectives on their children's play.

The most effective way of providing such support is by developing responsive key-person relationships (Elfer et al 2002) in a well-managed key-worker system. Such a system offers children adults who are available for prolonged periods of time and who support and, when necessary, comfort them as they begin to experiment with physical and emotional independence.

### Movers and doers

Babies and toddlers have an insatiable appetite to explore and control their own bodies and to move around their environment. The idea that toddlers 'don't really concentrate' and 'just need to let off steam' may lead practitioners to make a false differentiation between 'play' (running about) and 'learning' (sitting down).



This distinction disregards the huge amount of learning that occurs as toddlers move around in their play. Movement and exposure to varied physical experiences allows them to explore various concepts and thereby lay down more connections in the brain (Gopnik et al 1999).

Babies and toddlers, therefore, need play opportunities that support physical activity indoors and outdoors throughout the day and match closely their rapidly changing physical skills.

## Thinking and imagining

Under-threes use play as a tool with which they are making sense of the world. They are solving questions of:

- What is it?
- What does it do?
- What can I do with it?

They explore their world with all their senses and their whole bodies. The concept of sensory-motor experiences being primary sources of information and knowledge for nought to three-year-olds holds true (Piaget 1952), and play such as with the treasure basket and heuristic play (Goldschmied and Jackson 1994) provide rich sensory play experiences that boxes of plastic toys do not. Such play is also tuned to this age group's enjoyment of collecting, distributing, emptying and refilling, shaking, banging and investigating.

As they interact with their environment in their play, whether by swiping at a mobile or pushing a buggy, they are exercising their muscles and experiencing new sensations. They are cognitively active, thinking about cause and effect, about relative speed and distance and about spatial relationships and the manoeuvrability of solid objects. They are using their memories of past actions to plan their play. These are all cognitive processes (Goswami 1999).

It seems that infants actively seek and use stimulation to strengthen and extend neural connections from birth (Gopnik et al 1999). Everything a baby hears, sees, tastes, touches, feels and smells, and all of a baby's movements will influence the way the brain makes its connections, so the more varied and appropriate the play experiences we offer, the better the essential connections between neural cells.

However, any attempts at hot housing by using, say, worksheets, are more likely to narrow the scope of children's play, rather than foster their curiosity and enthusiasm for exploring and learning.

Babies and toddlers need to be involved in everyday experiences. Activities such as washing and tearing lettuces for lunch are meaningful for them, enhancing their sense of belonging and contribution and fostering their desire to imitate, which Piaget (1962) suggested was the first step towards representation.

## Learning about themselves and others

Babies and toddlers also use play as a kind of ticket to the social life of the community where they explore the questions:



- Who are you?
- How are we the same and different?
- What can we do together?

The idea that under-threes are 'egocentric' has led to a view of them only playing alone or alongside others and moving in stages from playing with objects to playing with other children, implying little prior interest in other children. However, more recently we have come to see babies as social beings, interested in others from the beginning (Dunn 1988, Trevarthan 1998).

In addition, the work of Goldschmied and Selleck (1996) shows how very young babies respond to each other with movements and vocalisations. It shows how objects are explored by the individual child but also used in games with adults and other children as a form of communication where a child has yet few words.

The play experiences planned by early years practitioners should, therefore, have children's social relationships as a central focus and, to effectively support their growing sense of themselves, they should positively reflect and value each child's identity and background. The stronger the partnership between practitioner and parent/carer, the more able the practitioner will be to represent the child's home in the early years setting.

The earliest forms of young children's social pretend-play are often based on experiences that are emotionally significant and shared with peers, such as caring for a baby. So providing real resources, such as nappies and bottles, and resources that reflect children's home cultures, is fundamental.

But young children's limited language, social skills and strong feelings can put them on a collision course with their peers. It is important, therefore, that practitioners support babies and toddlers' social play sensitively.

## Communication skills

Being active communicators, yet having limited language, is a characteristic of this age group that impacts strongly on how we see their social play. Babies are communicators from birth; they ensure that their needs are met through a range of communication strategies.

In the second year of life there is an explosion of language, yet toddlers still have a limited vocabulary which frustrates them when they are trying to express themselves. Having an effective key-worker system can reduce the number of times that children are misunderstood.

Being articulate depends not on having a large vocabulary, but rather on our self-confidence and skills in expressing our needs and our ability to listen and negotiate. This learning begins with our earliest trusting relationships. Hence the significance of practitioners' work in fostering babies' and toddlers' drive to communicate through frequent focused interactions with their key person.



## Attention to detail

To develop high-quality play, practitioners must pay attention to the fine detail of all aspects of provision for under-threes. For example, practitioners need to reflect on how an opportunity to explore paint is presented, not only plan when to make paint available.

The detail of the whole curriculum must be considered - what under-threes experience at bathroom times, how they can move between indoors and outdoors, or how they are supported in separating and reuniting with their parents, all will impact for better or worse on the children's play, growth and learning.

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