

Schemas: repeated patterns of behaviour

Chris Athey's work on **schemas** has been influential in helping adults understand the importance of repetition in children's learning.

Athey built on the work of Piaget on how children come to construct understanding through experience. Athey defines a schema as "a pattern of repeatable behaviour into which experiences are assimilated and that are gradually co-ordinated. Co-ordinations lead to higher-level and more powerful schemas." Athey (2007: 50)

How do schemas work?

A child will have an area in which they are mainly interested at any one time. To learn about how this aspect of the world works they will repeat an action over and over again until they understand this in different contexts. In addition to repeating an action a child will look for other ways to explore their interest.

Here are some common patterns of behaviour seen in many children. If you are aware of schemas, when you observe children you may see these sorts of behaviours repeated regularly. It is important to remember that children may be working with more than one schema at a time, and that if you want to plan for children based on their schemas you should observe involved behaviour regularly – fleeting interests are not schemas.

Schema	Possible Behaviour	Example extension ideas
Trajectory	Throwing items in various directions, climbing up and jumping off	Target practice; Play with ribbons waving them up and down or side to side; Build towers from a variety of materials; Make zebra crossings
Enveloping	Wrapping self in a blanket, covering whole painting with one colour, putting notes in envelopes to post	Make dens; have layers of clothing available; practice wrapping presents or putting letters into envelopes; Make houses with roofs
Enclosure	Filling and emptying containers, climbing into boxes , making dens	Use lego boards etc. to develop building houses; Design borders on paper.
Transporting	Carrying small items round in bags and buckets, pushing other children and objects round in prams and pushchairs	Give items that can be moved; Take on picnics or trips to see trains, buses etc. transporting people; draw maps, follow roads
Rotation	Rolling and being spun round, playing with wheeled toys, watching the washing machine	Visit roundabouts, roll with rolling pins, explore cogs and water wheels etc.
Connection	Joining furniture with wool or ribbon , joining train tracks together, sticking boxes and models together	Make trains and carriages; Look at different types of knots; explore with a stapler and other office materials to join paper together; Use building materials and construction sets that join together
Positioning	Lining up objects, walking round the edge of things, being particular about where food goes on their plate	Have lots of items that can be lined up, use the interest to practice sorting and positioning language. Make caterpillars or trains etc.
Assembling	Making piles, or arranging things by lining items up or stacking things randomly or neatly	Use construction items that can be piled such as wooden bricks; Give scarfs etc you are happy to pile.