

QUALITY INTERACTIONS IN FREE-PLAY: A GUIDE

THE IMPORTANCE OF FREE PLAY IN THE EARLY YEARS

“Play is essential for children’s development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, relate to others, set their own goals and solve problems. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play, which is guided by adults. Practitioners need to decide what they want children in their setting to learn, and the most effective ways to teach it. Practitioners must stimulate children’s interests, responding to each child’s emerging needs and guiding their development through warm, positive interactions coupled with secure routines for play and learning. As children grow older and move into the reception year, there should be a greater focus on teaching the essential skills and knowledge in the specific areas of learning. This will help children to prepare for year 1.” (Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage)

Having control of their learning, and building on the successes brought about by it:

- ✓ encourages children’s imagination and creativity
- ✓ enables children to follow through ideas and approaches of their own
- ✓ leads to problem-solving and using initiative
- ✓ often involves collaboration and co-operation as children get older
- ✓ can involve risk-taking and making mistakes, which children become confident enough to rectify
- ✓ involves intense concentration and perseverance because children are self-motivated
- ✓ develops self-believe and resilience.

All of these are life skills, vital for young children as they learn to piece together their own internal cognitive jigsaw of the world. (Julie Fisher, 2013)

CHILDREN’S INDIVIDUAL LEARNING GOALS

Each child in our Reception class will have differing development priorities and learning goals, which will be considered carefully using ongoing assessment by the class teacher in collaboration with support staff. We will need to bear these priorities in mind when interacting with the children in their free-play in order to move their learning on, but they must not be allowed to take over and redirect the children from following their own interests (unless they are unsafe or will cause harm to themselves or others) – high quality interactions between adult and child are always the top priority.



THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY INTERACTIONS

The development of children's spoken language underpins all seven areas of learning and development. Children's back-and-forth interactions from an early age form the foundations for language and cognitive development. The number and quality of the conversations they have with adults and peers throughout the day in a language-rich environment is crucial. (Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage)



Interactions with young children are profoundly important for supporting and extending their learning. Interactions are a crucial way in which early years practitioners can enhance and extend children's learning and development.

Children with poor speech, language and communication can become withdrawn or present with challenging behaviour. Language difficulties can impact emotional development, and many children can become withdrawn socially, often ending up playing alone and less liked by others in their group or class. For all of these reasons, and so many more, no early years educator should ever let a potential conversation pass them by. (Julie Fisher 2013)

How to initiate and sustain a quality interaction (*Interacting or Interfering?* Julie Fisher)

Julie Fisher: “the secret is to join in without taking over; to follow the child's thinking and to be the adult the child needs in order to achieve their own goals.”

If the integrity of play is to be maintained then the practitioner must be sensitive to all these learning possibilities and adjust their role accordingly. The effective practitioner tunes in to what the child is trying to achieve and makes a split-second decision about whether the learning needs their support. Tuning in requires stillness – observation, listening and thinking – before intervention.

Talk less and listen more:

- ✓ **WAIT**
- ✓ **WATCH**
- ✓ **WONDER**

An effective interaction will leave the child with something positive that they would not otherwise have had.



Questions that enhance child-led learning are usually those which:

- ✓ **show interest/clarify** (following up something that has already been said): for example, ‘So, it sounds as though you live in the roof?’; ‘Did Matilda go to the party too then?’

By commenting on what children are interested in or doing, and echoing back what they say with new vocabulary added, practitioners will build children's language effectively. (Statutory Framework For The Early Years Foundation Stage)

- ✓ **reflect and connect:** adding something personal to the conversation can help the child to relate their experiences, such as: “My car is red, I might make a red car out of bricks.”
- ✓ **ponder** (encouraging creative thinking): for example, ‘I wonder where bubbles go when they pop?’; ‘I wonder if bear felt better when the light came on?’
- ✓ **pose possibilities** (planting an idea): for example, ‘Maybe you need to find something for Johnny to stand on?’; ‘Do you think another block might help keep it steady?’

It is recommended that, having asked a question, practitioners wait at least three and up to ten seconds before saying anything else.

HOW TO ENTER THE CHILDREN'S PLAY

“Practitioners often have difficulties knowing when and how to interact in children's self-initiated play. They often make the mistake of going into a play activity with lots of questions, and may try to take on a role that does not flow easily into the play – one practitioner described this as ‘going in with your size tens and flattening the play’. Children like playing with adults, however, and actively seek adults as co-players. A guiding principle is to do what young children do when they are learning to be good players – they often stand at the edges of play and watch what is happening. They may be observing strategies for entering the play, trying to understand the rules of the play, or thinking about what they can offer. Sometimes they ask permission to enter – ‘Please can I play?’ – and sometimes they wait to be asked. Children seem to know intuitively that they need to tune in to what is happening in order to be included in the flow of the play.
(Learning, Playing and Interacting DFE)

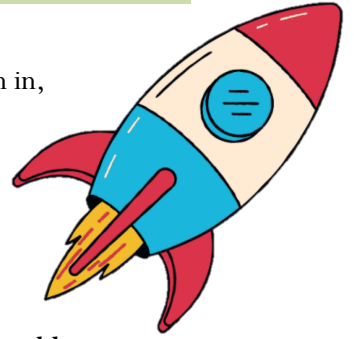
PRACTITIONERS CAN USE THE FOLLOWING STRATEGIES TO JOIN IN PLAY:

- ✓ Take a little time to observe, find out what the children are playing, and what are their roles and intentions.
- ✓ Consider whether you need to enter the play, and for what purposes (such as offering suggestions, introducing new ideas or vocabulary, managing the noise or behaviour, extending the activity through additional resources or negotiating entry for another child).
- ✓ Try to play on the children's terms by taking on a role that they suggest, and following children's instructions. With the youngest children, often participating alongside and imitating a child's actions with the same type of materials will signal that you are in tune and start a playful interaction.
- ✓ Offer your own ideas when you are sure that they are consistent with the flow of the play.
- ✓ Avoid going into closed questioning (‘How many? What colour? What size?’). Instead, try to maintain playful ways of engaging by following children's directions, and tuning into their meanings.
- ✓ Try not to direct the play to your own learning objectives or assessment agenda. Instead, be alert to the qualities of play, and to the knowledge and skills that children are using and applying.



MOVING ON THE CHILDREN'S LEARNING

When the children are engrossed in their play and you have been invited to join in, Greg Bottrill in *Can I Go and Play Now?* suggests that you can then sprinkle some curricular learning on top.



Perhaps like this:



"Let's count down to blast off 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1! And for more able children what if we count down to blast off from 20 so the astronaut has time to check all the equipment is ready in the rocket? You can help me write out the numbers on the launch pad clipboard so we remember what comes next."

Or: how many hours will it take to get to the moon in your rocket? What might we see on the way? Then with excitement, grab a couple of clipboards to make a list of amazing space sights to tick off on the journey. It is suggested in this sort of play, the adult starts the writing for them so as not to kill the moment, unless they are very keen writers, but ask them to help you sound talk some of the spellings using their phonics, or invite them to have a turn writing."

(The idea is that supporting them in their play this way, another day they will chose to do something similar even without support, as we have modeled what to do).

Extending children's learning in role-play

Alistair Bryce Clegg suggests that even when presented with some creative role-play environments carefully linked the week's learning objectives, children are often likely revert to domestic role play: **"I'm the mummy, you're the sister and she's the dog"**. If that's what they're interested in doing independently, we need to try to engage with it when we are there too, but draw out the opportunities to build on their skills.



Maybe the child being the dog could go and make a mask or headband in the junk modelling area? - they'll be using their cutting skills, maybe some measuring skills to make it the right size, problem solving to work out where and how to make the eye holes (never do it for them or they'll just be dependent on you every time - show them ideas how they could do it themselves if necessary!). Maybe the mummy and sister could role play making a shopping list and go and buy the items for dinner, which involves writing, reading and practicing using money in the play shop. Or maybe the children could work together to build a table, chairs and dog bed with outdoor construction and then act out their story line together, which involves lots of problem solving and talking to each other.