

Early Learning with Schemas

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Last month, at a course, I was introduced to the concept of Schemas within children's early years learning. I knew that children learnt through play, that if I set out the water tray he would develop an understanding of volume and size and his gross motor control would improve. But the emphasis was on one particular activity which I had initiated and I had to work very hard to keep his attention for more than a few minutes at a time. When we discussed schemas it linked in with the behaviours shown during a child's natural play and activity.

Have you found that your child repeats certain patterns of behaviour especially when at play? Do they line up their toys, hide under blankets or in small places, move toys from one place to another? Often these repeated actions can leave us puzzled, bemused and sometimes worried or anxious.

I've noticed it at home with my 2 ½ year old. He loves to be carried, he's constantly climbing on the furniture or up the kitchen cupboard fronts, he wants to walk on the driveways on which there is shingle and he will always head for the highest slide in the playground. When I try and put a stop to his climbing I'm presented with a huge temper tantrum and I feel awful because I it is as if I am always telling him "No, don't do that".



Before I heard about schemas I had never linked these behaviours together. All of a sudden I have been able to understand my little boy's behaviour that little bit better. He wasn't being naughty and this was his natural way of discovering his world and understanding how it works. With this in mind I began to look at the ways in which I could support him and use his natural enthusiasm to encourage his engagement with activities. Let me share what I've found out...

What is a Schema?

Schemas were first identified in the 1950's by the Swiss Educational Psychologist, Jean Piaget. A schema is a repeating pattern of behaviour which is part of child's natural learning process. Children are very curious and repeat actions to better understand how things work in the world around them. When involved in these learning rich activities children will become very focused, often getting upset or cross if their play is interrupted.

Do All Children Have a Schema?

The short answer is yes. Some children will show one very dominant schema which is very easy to notice whilst others may show two or more at once making it harder to clearly identify. Some schemas will be present for long periods of our lives; others will be experienced before moving on to another.

We all learn, even as adults, from practising and experimenting, so instead of trying to stop your child's play, embrace, support and celebrate it. By encouraging their exploration through activities which utilise their dominant schema your child will experience learning rich opportunities that you can be a part of.



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Types of Schemas

There are over 30 identified schemas, but below you will find a list of the most common ones and ways in which to support them.

Trajectory

Children show interest with straight lines and how things move. This may include playing with running water, drawing in straight lines, pushing toy vehicles across the floor or lining them up. Outside they make lines or patterns in the sand or mud and enjoy throwing, kicking or bouncing balls.

•Support them by providing:

- Soft balls to roll or throw;
- Bubbles to catch;
- Opportunities to pour water;
- Opportunities to help with sweeping or mopping the floors;
- Opportunities to draw on large pieces of paper, or, on outside wall with water.

Transporting

Children with this schema love to move everything (toys, everyday objects, themselves and others) from one place to another. They love to carry something, no matter what it is and will also love being carried. They may go back and forth bringing you items from around the room.

•Support them by providing:

- A collection of bags and boxes;
- Items to move around e.g. collections of pebbles, small boxes etc;
- A toy pushchair or other push-a-long toys;
- Opportunities to help with your food shop by letting them retrieve items off the shelves.

On Top

This can be a very challenging scheme for adults as we are aware of the risks involved. Children feel the need to climb on top of furniture and worktops as well as climbing on you! They will want to reach up and place objects on top surfaces and to balance items on top of one another.

•Support them by providing:

- Opportunities to climb e.g. climbing frame, climbing trees, obstacle course from sofa cushions etc;
- Support in reaching high surfaces to place objects;
- Stacking toys;
- Clear boundaries so they know where it is appropriate to climb.

Enveloping

This child is interested in covering themselves, objects or a space. They'll use blankets or towels to cover things up, climbing into empty boxes or burying objects in the sandpit. They may also paint a beautiful picture and then completely cover it with more paint!

•Support them by providing:

- Materials like blankets for them to use to make homemade dens;
- Dressing up clothes;
- Paper and newspaper to make parcels;
- Opportunities for them to paint themselves (washable paint of course) followed by enveloping them in a bath!

Containing/ Enclosure

Children who create enclosed spaces into which they may or may not place objects or themselves. They love to sort toys into containers, filling buckets with sand or water. Like Envelopment they may like to climb into boxes and other containers!

•Support them by: providing

- Building bricks to make enclosures;
- Various sized pots with things they can use to contain objects;
- Lots of different materials for putting in containers e.g. sand, water, rice, pasta etc;
- Boxes or tents to go in;
- Containers with lids and observe what your child does with the lid.



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Our Schema At Home

My child's on top schema is very dominant at the moment. He climbs on to everything! Indoors he's on the furniture, on us and most recently almost up the bookcase!!! Whilst he has always loved being carried, his confidence with heights has really developed during the the last couple of months. For a slightly over protective mummy this has been very worrying and on occasions rather stressful. I find myself torn in two. Part of me wants him to have confidence in his actions and gain what is to be learnt to the fullest. However, the other half wants to swaddle him in bubble wrap so that he never knows what it is like to get hurt!

I've come up with a compromise. I give clear messages about where and what is appropriate to climb. On the sofa and outdoor play equipment is fine but the 6 foot bookcase and glass topped coffee table is definitely not.

I provide my child with plenty of opportunities to climb (always with supervision) during our days together and I find that once he's had time to do this he's much happier. As it tends to be a very physical outdoors activity he also sleeps better. I've started to think of other non climbing activities that tie into his schema for us to try. He loves laying the sofa cushions on the floor and either walking over them or lying on them. He used to get very frustrated when I started cooking so now he sits on the kitchen counter whilst I stand next to him and he helps with stirring cake mix or making his sandwich.



Knowing which learning schema my child is experiencing has enhanced my understanding of how I can best support his learning. This results in me providing him with opportunities and materials not only to engage and extend his interest but also to increase his understanding of how the world works. Maybe, not so surprisingly, by accommodating his interests, we have experienced minimal frustrations and an increased amount of positive and enjoyable time together.

References and Further Reading:

- The Power of Schemas, Enhancing Family Involvement in Children's Learning, KCC
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