



Places

to talk

In the concluding part of her series, **Kathy Brodie** explains how to embed Sustained Shared Thinking in your setting..

In this article, I will be exploring some of the ways you can ensure that the practitioners in your setting can embed Sustained Shared Thinking in their everyday practice. I've identified three vital areas: physical environment, the role of the practitioner and working with parents and carers.

First, though, as a reminder, Sustained Shared Thinking developed from the EPPE research and is defined as:

[A]n episode in which two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend. (Sylva et al. 2004: 36)

The concept of Sustained Shared Thinking came from a combination of observations that the EPPE team had made during their research. They had found that the best outcomes for children had been achieved when practitioners had used dialogue, interactions, adult modelling and questioning. They combined the ideas from all these

techniques to produce Sustained Shared Thinking.

The aspects of physical environment and the role of the practitioner are vital because the environment sets the stage for practitioners to have opportunities for SST. Working with parents and carers encourages SST to happen naturally in the home.

Physical environment

When planning the physical environment in your setting it is important that Sustained Shared Thinking is considered from the very beginning. As you are setting up the different areas in the classroom, you need to think about how the children will interact with them. For example, if there are long, open spaces, children will invariably run up and down them. An environment that encourages conversations can be designed by dividing the areas into discrete sections, where children can sit or stand to talk together. This encourages SST between children and enables practitioners to start conversations easily.

Consider including a 'withdraw' area where quiet conversations can be held. This

can be as simple as a piece of net or shower curtain hung from the ceiling, but which gives the children a feeling of privacy. These areas can be used by practitioners for talking with their key groups, individual children or groups with a common interest. The extra privacy should help children concentrate and be a signal to others that this is a special time where conversations are valued and appreciated.

An effective way to promote conversation is to include items of provocation in the environment. These may be very overt, such as a peacock feather with a glitter trail left to it or a small fairy tea party left in the digging area. They may also be subtler, such as a tiny door in the skirting board or an item buried in the sandpit. Either way, these items can be used to provoke conversations with children. The items left can be tailored to match the children's interests to encourage talking, for example, using a pirate's treasure chest or having an alien spaceship. Once the conversations have been started, practitioners can then follow the children's interests by using SST to help to understand the children's thinking. For example, one child may like pirates because they wear hats and

eye patches, whereas another child may like pirates because they like boats. Only by having the in-depth conversations that are characteristic of SST can practitioners find this out. The environment and activities can then be extended in the correct way, once practitioners know this information.

The practitioner's role

Practitioners who know their children well are in a good position to engage in Sustained Shared Thinking in the nursery. They should be aware of the difference between a casual chat with a child, which does not extend a narrative or clarify a concept, and an in-depth conversation. For example, consider the following exchange:

Practitioner: "Is that Thomas?"

Jack: "Yes, he's blue."

Practitioner: "Yes, he is blue."

Jack: "I like Thomas."

This is not SST because the narrative is not extended and there is only the briefest sharing of knowledge (we know Jack likes Thomas now). However, if the practitioner had gone on to have an in-depth conversation with Jack about Thomas's

friends - if he had seen the DVD, how the tracks could be laid out, etc. - then this would be SST.

Practitioners should use active listening during SST. This means getting down to their children's level, using positive, open body language and giving their children their full attention. This may seem difficult in the busy nursery environment. Encouraging an ethos in the setting where children are respectful of SST and where practitioners support each other can alleviate this.

The key person is most likely to be best attuned (or able to tune into) their key child's interests. This is because the key person is most likely to understand the context of the conversation, as she or he will know the family as well. For example, if James starts talking about Harri, the key person is likely to know that James and Harri are cousins, and played together over the weekend. This gives the key person more background knowledge to be able to extend the narrative with appropriate prompts and questions.

Working with parents

First of all, it should be remembered that parents and carers are not all the same, and



about the author

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will have different needs, viewpoints and changing situations. Just as we consider the unique child, we should also consider the 'unique parent'. This means that the kind of interactions and relationships you have with parents will differ and will also vary over time as things change, for example, the arrival of a new baby or change of job. For some parents and carers, Sustained Shared Thinking will already be a big part of their lives. For others, it may seem unusual to hold an extended conversation with a young child.

The EPPE research, and subsequent research, has shown that the home learning environment (HLE) has the greatest impact on the cognitive and socio-behavioural outcomes for children: it is highly influential. Therefore, the positive effects of SST are even greater when it is also supported at home as part of the home learning environment.

When working with parents and carers, it is essential to explain that SST is not complicated. It can be done during regular activities, such as during bath-time, at mealtimes or on the walk to nursery. Practitioners can support parents and carers by modelling SST for them, as well as explaining the benefits of SST. There are many advantages of encouraging SST in the home, for example, older siblings or other family members can be the more knowledgeable other and initiate SST. There are more likely to be other types of role models for children to talk to who are less represented in nursery, such as grandparents or male family members.

By encouraging parents and carers to use active listening, paying attention and responding positively to their child's conversation, they are taking part in Sustained Shared Thinking.

Final thoughts

Sustained Shared Thinking can be embedded into your nursery with some careful thought about the environment and with practitioners understanding their role. This is greatly enhanced by encouraging parents and carers to engage in SST at home as well. A virtuous cycle of good practice can result, with children eager to take part in SST with positive, engaged practitioners.



FURTHER READING

- Sylva, K. et al *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education [EPPE] Project* (DfES, 2004)
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. 'Conceptualising progression in the pedagogy of play and sustained shared thinking in early childhood education: A Vygotskian perspective' *Educational and Child Psychology* Vol. 26, Iss. 2