



Engaging PLAY

Sue Gascoyne explains how providing young children with opportunities to explore their senses can also help to build parent-practitioner relationships...

Cast your mind back to your childhood and you may recall building dens, climbing trees, or losing yourself in the exploration of some natural phenomena, be it an ant trail or a seedpod. Even if your childhood was not characterised by *Swallows and Amazons*-like adventures, most adult's memories do involve sensory-rich experiences of some sort. These provide rich fodder for tapping into sensory-rich stimulation – essential for brain development – and memory-making potential, and are largely free or low-cost, which is great news when budgets are tight. When children are allowed to immerse themselves in an activity, whether it be swirling paint with their fingers, squelching it with a flat palm or pouring grains of sand from one container to another,

learning is relevant, real and rooted in children's interests and existing knowledge. Deeply absorbing play provides real curricular outputs without the need for expensive or specialist equipment. As such, sensory-rich play is a perfect vehicle for engaging parents in quality play and interactions with their children and fostering an understanding of the benefits of play.

For one father and son, sand and water unlocked a magical process of exploration and discovery. The boy, about three years-old, squatted down next to a sand tray and began filling and pouring sand using an assortment of containers. His father looked on, not rushing the process or interrupting play. An hour later he shared with me how his son never normally plays for long. This father, a paragon of

patience, proceeded to sit, watch and discuss his son's play for a further two hours, before leaving, vowing to offer sensory play at home. Few parents (or practitioners) would be quite so patient, but that father discovered not just his son's aptitude for concentrated play, but also its benefits and how easily he could replicate this.

Supporting understanding

The absorptive qualities of sensory play create a platform for learning about children's developmental levels, interests, repeated patterns of behaviour and talents. With a supportive practitioner signposting milestones and benefits, it can also demonstrate a playful

Linking home and setting

Sensory play can yield opportunities for better understanding children's home life and prevailing concerns, like one six-year-old Norwegian boy relatively new to his setting and not particularly integrated within the group. For this little boy the indoor water tray became a catalyst for sharing his anxieties about his father, who was away fishing, providing a channel for communication with practitioners. Through his play, he was able to convey not only his fear for his father's safe return, but also the fact that his father was a fisherman, something they were hitherto unaware of. He subsequently forged bonds, becoming better assimilated.

An excellent way of developing partnerships with parents is to invite them to bring in items to add to a collection of resources, be it a treasure basket, heuristic play objects, fabrics or a particular theme. This works particularly well when the items are culturally relevant and can form a bridge between the home and setting.

about the author

Sue Gascoyne is an author, early years researcher, educational consultant and trainer, and founder of children's play resource company Play to Z. Her new book, *Treasure Baskets and Beyond: Realizing the Potential of Sensory-Rich Play*, from which this article is extracted, is available from Open University Press now.

pedagogy in practice, helping parents better understand and support their children's play. Permission, time and enabling environments can be more important to quality play than specialised resources. Unkempt wild areas offer more play potential than manicured lawns and flowerbeds, and in the hands of an imaginative child a cardboard box can become a car, castle, spaceship or whatever they want it to be.

I observed a mother watching as her child spilt dried rice over an exhibition stand and allowed him to find his own solution to clearing it up whilst enjoying pattern-making in the process. This revealed the importance of giving children time to explore and the value of not rushing in to 'rescue' children, removing their ability to solve their own problems and learn from mistakes. Moments like these also highlight children's innate aptitude for problem-solving and the brilliance of a child's brain.

The adult's role

For many parents, active involvement in a child's play is synonymous with 'good parenting'. Observing treasure basket sessions, responding positively to the resource, watching in silence, sitting nearby, smiling and giving reassurance or praise if needed, asking open-ended questions and subtle actions were found to be most effective in supporting play. Take the grandfather, sat near a treasure basket, watching his grandson play:

When the three-year-old got up to move away, rather than immediately following, he picked up a spoon and gently tapped it on the edge of the metal bucket to attract the child's attention. This action alone, without any words, was enough for the boy to come back and sit down to play with the objects. Later, when the boy had moved to the container of sand and his attention waned, the grandfather gently swirled a metal pot containing dry sand, couscous and rice. The larger grains rose to the top and made a gentle noise. The boy looked at the pot saying "noise", then resumed play. Still later, the grandfather provided encouragement as his grandson used a spoon to fill a tin with dried couscous, sand, rice, glitter and alphabet pasta. He said in a sing-song voice, "It's getting fuller and fuller and fuller" in time with the boy's careful actions.

Examples like these succinctly illustrate the important role of grandparents in furthering children's interests, supporting children and parents with a playful pedagogy and in some instances as a key link with early years settings. Unfettered exploration and play with sensory-rich objects offers deeply enriching opportunities for problem-solving, developing creativity and imagination. It also can help develop fruitful partnerships with parents and rekindle childhood memories.



The Statutory Framework for the EYFS attaches great importance to the effective and meaningful engagement of parents, recognising that this is critical to the life opportunities of future generations

