



Encouraging independence

Alistair Bryce-Clegg presents a range of activities designed to give your children the chance to take the lead, grow their confidence and develop a range of skills...

One of the key skills for life that we want to empower our children with in the early years is independence, both in relation to their actions and their thinking. To become independent, children have to be confident in their own abilities otherwise they will remain over reliant on the support of other adults or their more confident peers. Their confidence grows through opportunities to try new things in a safe and supportive environment with lots of positive reinforcement for their success and strategies to support any failures they may have along the way. Young children are on the whole very resourceful and very resilient, and when left to their own devices or given opportunities to be independent they can often surprise us.

As practitioners we need to ensure that we are not only creating an environment and planning activities that are teaching children fundamental skills, but that we are giving them opportunities to put those skills into practice on their own, too. This might involve something as simple as filling a paint pot or as complicated as making bread. Both, and much more, are possible if children are given the correct input in the right environment, and then given the chance to have a go for themselves. Try the following activities and see for yourself!

1 Collecting tubes

What you need:

- Long tube with a lid (often used for packaging crisps).
- Wrapping paper or comics
- Sticky tape
- String or wool
- Luggage labels (if personalising)

What to do:

- 1 Cover the tube in wrapping paper or pages of a comic.
- 2 Attach a piece of string to the top and bottom of the tube to create a shoulder strap.
- 3 Add a luggage label with the name and/or photograph of the child.
- 4 Fill the tube with resources or a challenge. You can put any sort of challenge into your tube. It could be a numeracy activity to complete, a mark-making resource to try out or a workshop resource to encourage children to make something by cutting sticking and creating.
- 5 Allow the children to collect things of interest in their tube.

Taking it forward:

Have a number of tubes in lots of areas around your environment. Theme them to the interests of your children. Let the children take their tube and use it anywhere within your space that takes their fancy.

What's in it for the children?

Even through you might be in control of what goes into the tube, the children get the feeling that they are very much in charge of when and where they complete the contents of their challenge tube. This is great for engagement as well as independence.



2 Deconstructed role-play

What you need:

- Large and small cardboard boxes
- Baskets
- Milk and bread crates
- Cardboard tubes
- Fabric
- Hats and mirrors

What to do:

- 1 Make a collection of open-ended resources like boxes and tubes.
- 2 Place them in a large open space.
- 3 Encourage the children to use their imagination to turn these open-ended resources into specific play experiences that are meaningful to them.

Taking it forward:

Create a deconstructed role-play area indoors and out.



What's in it for the children?

If children do not have a great deal of personal experience of a role-play space that they have set up, then they are going to struggle to play in it without adult support, often reverting to playing 'house' or 'super heroes'. A deconstructed role-play area supports any play theme because of its open-ended potential.

3 Funky fingers time

What you need:

- Carpet or table top space
- Piece of music that the children will relate to
- Resources to support the skill development

What to do:

- 1 Differentiate the resources so that children are given an activity that help to promote independence.
- 2 Have all of the children working at the same time.
- 3 Put on your piece of music.
- 4 Get the children to carry out their activity in time with the music.
- 5 Get children kneading large pieces of dough to develop their upper arms and hands, threading pasta onto a string to develop hand/eye coordination and picking up lentils with tweezers to develop their pincer grip.
- 6 The activity ends when the music stops.

Taking it forward:

Have 'funky fingers' indoors for fine motor activities as well as outdoors for gross motor activities.

What's in it for the children?

We sometimes give children resources, such as scissors, that we want them to use in their independent work and exploration. The problem often occurs that the children's level of dexterity is not high enough to enable effective use of the resource. Funky fingers is an opportunity to practise and develop that dexterity and activity in a short, funky and fun way. Then children can be truly independent in their work.

4 Personalised labelling

What you need:

- Camera
- Printer
- Laminator
- Paper (for speech bubbles)
- Marker pen

What to do:

- 1 Decide which aspects of your environment and the provision would benefit from a label.
- 2 Take photographs of children from the setting giving a visual clue to what is going to be on the written label.
- 3 Write in a speech bubble an explanation of what is happening in the photo.
- 4 Laminate the photo and the speech bubble, and put them in the appropriate part of your environment.

Taking it forward:

Not only use the children in the environmental labelling but also use images of the adults who work in the space.

What's in it for the children?

The children are more likely to engage with the labelling because it features their significant adults, themselves and their peers. The photographs will also help them to interpret what the print says, thereby increasing the potential for independent learning.



5 Real tools

What you need:

- Selection of real tools (you can buy fully working miniature versions)
- Work bench
- Pieces of wood

What to do:

- 1 Model to the children how the tools work and should be used.
- 2 Work alongside the children to show them how to use the tools safely.
- 3 Give the children lots of opportunity to use the tools independently but with supervision.
- 4 Allow the children to use the tools independently.

Be sure to ensure children's safety when operating any tools.

Taking it forward:

Have a range of tools available for use by the children both indoors and out.

What's in it for the children?

There is usually a high level of engagement in this sort of activity and children from a very young age can be shown how to use tools proficiently. As well as the high level of independence, the children are reinforcing lots of key skills such as hand/eye coordination and fine motor control.





6 Self-service paint area - Powder paint

What you need:

- Powder paint
- Sugar shakers
- Small pots
- Paintbrushes
- Water in a pump dispenser

What to do:

- 1 Fill the sugar shakers with different colours of powder paint.
- 2 Show the children how to shake the dry powder into their pot.
- 3 Add water by squirting it from the dispenser.
- 4 Mix the paints up ready to use.
- 5 Let the children use the paint independently as required.

Taking it forward:

For a greater challenge try just giving the children primary colours and black and white paint, and let them experiment to find all of the other colours that they might want to use.

What's in it for the children?

This gives the children a high level of independence and allows them to really experiment with the creative process of paint mixing. This sort of area works really well with children aged two years and upwards.

7 Self-service paint area - Ready mixed paint

What you need:

- Pump dispensers (like liquid soap)
- Small pots
- Ready mixed paint
- Brushes and sponges

What to do:

- 1 Decant the ready mixed paint into the pump dispensers.
- 2 Show the children how to squirt the paint into the pots or mixing palettes.
- 3 Let them use the paint independently for creative designs.

Taking it forward

Talk to the children about how many pumps they should use at one time. Offer the children a range of other ingredients like flour or porridge oats that they can use to add thickness or texture to their paint.

What's in for the children?

The children are not only learning about paint, texture and colour but this provision also supports them in being very self-sufficient.



9 Waterfall guttering

What you need:

- Access to an outdoor tap
- Hose pipe
- Plastic guttering
- Electric drill
- Screws

What to do:

- 1 Attach the guttering to the wall at child height.
- 2 Tilt the pieces of guttering at an angle so that the water can flow from one into the other.
- 3 Let the children use the hose to create a waterfall effect.

Taking it forward:

Add other resources that will roll or slide down the guttering such as toy cars, balls or ice cubes.

Provide lots of different sized containers to catch the water at the bottom of the waterfall.

What's in it for the children?

The children are self-managing the use of water outdoors and this control gives them a high level of independence. They will have the opportunity to learn about how water moves and can be controlled as well as having great fun!

8 Tinkering

What you need

- Various everyday objects that children can safely take to bits and 'tinker' with to find out how they work and how they are made.
- Appropriate tools

What to do:

- 1 Check any equipment that you give children to tinker with to ensure that there are no dangerous parts.
- 2 Explain to the children that what they are going to tinker with no longer works, which is why they can take it apart.
- 3 Provide as many real tools as you can for them to use.
- 4 Monitor their tinkering to ensure that

there is no risk from small parts.

Ensure children's safety in using tools. Make sure any items they are investigating are safe for them to explore.

Taking it forward:

Create a 'tinker table' where children have constant access to things that they can deconstruct.

What's in it for the children?

The children are learning lots about how things are made and also how to take them apart. Alongside firing their interest and imagination, tinkering is good for developing children's fine motor skills and hand/eye coordination.

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The activities in this article have been taken from Featherstone's 50 fantastic ideas for promoting independence by Alistair Bryce-Clegg. To claim an exclusive 20% discount, order online using code FANTASTIC by 31 January at bloomsbury.com/featherstone

