

coming TO OUR senses

Sue Gascoyne suggests ways in which adults can initiate meaningful sensory play...



Spring is a great time for giving our senses a much needed workout. On a quiet walk through a wood with my six month-old puppy, I was struck by how primed my senses were. Inviting vistas of undulating, leaf-covered ground framed by bare boughs revealed themselves as I passed, while verdant grass, interspersed with the yellow blobs of cowslips, still water and pale cherry blossom petals dancing in the air, all provided ample visual appeal. A cool breeze and patches of sunshine gave relief, while the scent of fresh grass and wafts of earthy aromas added to the experience. A multitude of birdsong played around me, leaves rustled on the trees, and water gently trickled into a stream. Drinking in this tranquil, but far from silent scene, my mind naturally wandered to solving the challenges of the day. And so it is that in moments of quiet reflection, or deep absorption in an unrelated task, be it walking the dog, cooking or gardening, that our minds can be freed up to creatively problem-solve.

With children too, deeply absorbing play provides an opportunity to think, re-enact and problem-solve, a reminder perhaps that closely mapped-out lives with rigid timescales and few opportunities to just 'go with the flow' may actually stifle children's opportunities to connect with the world and think.

Adult-led play

Picture the average toy cupboard and the overriding visual appeal of most toys will be apparent. However, this is often at the expense of stimulating our other senses, which are vital not just for our healthy development but also for our emotional wellbeing. Like that walk in the woods, a sensory-rich treasure basket (an assortment of natural items and household objects perfect for age and developmentally appropriate play with children from six months to six years and beyond), provides ample opportunities for engaging all the senses, as well as a multitude of other benefits that make it perfect for supporting the EYFS. Using the Sensory Play

Continuum (Gascoyne, 2008) as a tool for further expanding the play potential of treasure baskets can help children get the most from these amazing resources and, vitally, provide adults with a steer on the thorny issue of when and how best to support children's play.

As the previous articles have shown, the emphasis in Stage 1 of the Continuum is on child-led free play with a treasure basket. This is extended in Stage 2 by the addition of appropriate resources, be it sand, water or more unusual concoctions, which the child chooses whether to combine or not with the treasure basket objects. The final stage of the Continuum, Stage 3 involves using simple adult-initiated activities with the treasure basket. Many may be inspired by children themselves, like weighing activities (picking two objects and children pretending that their arms are an old fashioned set of balancing scales to try to work out which object is heavier – great for problem-solving); threading (onto ribbon or string to explore holes – this will particularly appeal to children with a trajectory schema and is great for hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills); sink or swim (guessing which objects will sink and which will float in water – great for problem-solving, developing thinking skills etc); or buried treasure (when treasure-like objects are buried in sand for children to reveal with brushes and spoons on a mini archaeological dig, and later magnets added too for a foray into metal detecting – great for fine



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motor skills and imagination).

Through support and facilitation, the adult's skill and sensitivity, and crucially from building upon children's interests and developmental levels, children can be helped to move to Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development', where with support, a child's learning is extended beyond what they would achieve through independent play. (Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*, 1978).

In one such adult-led session with my children, Zachary (aged three) and his older sister Freya (aged six) played a game of guessing which objects would be attracted by magnets and later hiding objects under a cloth and guessing whether the magnet would attract them. As the adult I took an active role in enabling the younger sibling to contribute, explore and discover, alongside the older sibling:

Zachary:

- holds the large magnet over the basket (seemingly haphazardly at first)
- moves objects out of the way with his hand and then tries the magnet on specific objects
- looks through the basket (perhaps for objects to try?)
- exclaims when the magnet works. Looks

surprised when the magnet doesn't work on some metal objects

- actively joins in by closing his eyes and/or choosing an item to hide under the cloth.

The session built upon the moment as the children had discovered the magnets in a newly delivered parcel, and play evolved by covering an object with the cloth to add anticipation and excitement for both children. Zachary appeared to master the large magnets, showing good hand-eye coordination and gross and fine motor skills. His approach also appeared to shift from being haphazard to targeted.

His older sibling was equally keen to explore the basket with magnets. She appeared to develop her own games and challenges, for example, seeing how many objects she could pick up at one time and



Getting involved

HOW SHOULD PRACTITIONERS INTERACT WITH CHILDREN EXPLORING TREASURE BASKETS?

Watching young and older children absorbed in play with a treasure basket is a magical experience and gives a fantastic insight not just into children's interests, developmental levels and schemas but crucially their world. So what then of the adult's role?

■ **Stage 1** During Free Play the adult provides richly sensory resources and the space and time to freely enjoy these.

■ **Stage 2** Here the adult's observations were vital in picking resources which will enthral children when combined with the unusual objects and, again, the space and time to explore.

■ **Stage 3** This differs as the adult takes a more active role in initiating an activity based on their knowledge of children's interests and capabilities.

The common thread is the role of the adult in providing children with the necessary opportunities, space, time and freedom. The degree of adult involvement and indeed source of initiation may vary, but the importance of space and time remain a constant force.



exploring weight by using two magnets. Both children demonstrated focus, excitement, anticipation and problem-solving, albeit at different, age-appropriate levels.

Although originally intended for babies, as the above example and previous articles have shown, play with a treasure basket seems to offer older children something valuable and special too. This could be because of the richly sensory objects that make up a treasure basket; the inclusion of often 'forbidden objects' like pottery and glass; or perhaps the juxtaposition of highly contrasting objects, textures, materials and properties that throws up so many different age-appropriate possibilities and creative opportunities.

It makes sense

And so I return to the wonders of sensory-rich play and the magic that these simple resources hold for children. Like the closely guarded treasures collected by children on pre-school walks in

Finland (classified as 'litter' by adults) (Raittilla, R. in EECERA 2010 Abstract Book), a wooden spoon is rarely just that to a child but a resource for stirring, transporting, mark making, role-play, balancing, and so on; and the hole in the bottom of a tiny terracotta flower pot is seldom noticed by children, although obvious to adults.

The links of such play to the EYFS are evident with opportunities for supporting children's personal, social and emotional development through focus, concentration and private investigation; introducing language for communication, and practice for pencil control and hand-eye coordination. It also provides a wealth of problem-solving opportunities, introducing properties, scientific concepts, mastery of tools and pattern; offering an array of fine and gross motor skills and development; and ample fodder for inspiring creativity and imagination. So get playing!



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In their shoes

Engaging your own senses will help you appreciate the value of sensory-rich play...

As practitioners we understand the importance of process rather than products; the need for children to have adequate space and time to fully explore and become immersed in play. We witness first-hand children's fascination for sensory-rich play, exploring outdoors, discovering and creating; but how often do we give ourselves the space and time to reconnect with our own senses so that we too can enjoy some of the experiences that children marvel at?

I recently took one such opportunity and marvelled at the amazing feel of the fine sand particles sifting between my fingers; was surprised by the solid feel of a handful of sand in my clenched fist and how this slowly then quickly changed as the sand finally worked its way free, leaving my hand empty. I delighted at the patterns created first with my fingers and later using natural objects, and the dune-like ridges left on my outstretched fingers as the sand fell away. The satisfaction of this medium to me was clear. The experience was all-absorbing, calming and yet exciting. The space, time and sensation were tangible yet almost timeless.

Whilst before I knew how important sensory-rich play was, and had an inkling of the fascination of sand (or indeed any sensory-rich resource), it's only by experiencing the awe and wonder ourselves that we can really understand just how deep that concentration can be, how important space and thinking time are, how beneficial sensory-rich play can be, and our vital role in providing opportunities for truly enriching play.