



Seb engages in pretend play of cooking and baking in the playgroup sand area. He confidently initiates and directs the play with other children,

demonstrating the desirability of settings making play equipment readily accessible and relating it to children's experiences at home.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# Master chefs

Observing the level of involvement that children show in their play can tell you much about their emotional well-being, and about the effectiveness of your provision, says *Anne O'Connor*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

Seb (age three years four months) is at playgroup. There are a couple of sand trays grouped together and lots of familiar containers and utensils available. Nearby are some hollow blocks that the children are using as pretend ovens.

Seb is very talkative, initiating and directing the play until later when an older, very experienced child comes along. Seb shows previous knowledge of cooking and baking as he checks if the cakes are ready and warns the others that the ovens are hot. He shows high levels of involvement and well-developed social skills as he confidently engages with the other children.

**Although the children are well supervised, there is no direct adult involvement and the children are directing their own play.**

It is the ready accessibility of the equipment and materials that has enabled the children to take control of their play. Seb had earlier carried the hollow blocks closer to the sand to create the 'ovens'.

Having more than one sand tray allows children to transport the sand from one to the other and opens up play possibilities as children organise the space between the two. Similarly, there are familiar containers and utensils in the sand and these are 'open-ended' enough to support the children's imaginative play.

As well as the usual plastic pots and jugs, there are also trays and things from home, such as foil containers. These might well have helped to trig-

ger the ideas of cooking or baking, but could equally have been employed in a variety of other imaginative uses. The tea trays in particular are a focus for collaborative play and problem-solving as the children transfer their 'baking' around the space and into the ovens.

**It is clear from all the photographs that this is a child who is very involved in the play.**

By looking at his facial expressions we can see interest, concern and enquiry as well as pleasure and satisfaction. He is displaying high levels of engagement, and at times leads the play by involving others and by telling the story of what is happening.

Observing children's levels of involvement is a valuable way of assessing a child's emotional well-being, as well as their interaction with the activity and the processes involved in their learning. A child who is anxious, unhappy, agitated or in discomfort is unlikely to show such high levels of involvement. But it is worth remembering that it is possible to be very involved with something while appearing to do very little. A child watching and listening to Seb for a sustained period and occasionally handing him something is likely to be processing information and learning at a high level also.

A useful tool for assessing children's levels of involvement and well-being is the Leuven Involvement Scale, devised by Ferre Laevers at the Centre for Experiential Education in Belgium.

**3 Seb brings a lot of his previous experience to the play situation as he talks about baking and cooking, and reminds the others that the oven will be hot.**

The connections he makes between his experiences at home and the play he involves himself in provide concrete evidence of his learning and development.

Open-ended activities such as this provide opportunities for children to make important connections, and to revisit and experiment with the knowledge and learning they have acquired in one situation and apply it to another.

He is also extending his knowledge and understanding of capacity and volume as he observes and joins in with a more experienced child exploring the properties of sand.

**4 The collaborative nature of this activity provides powerful evidence of Seb's language and communication abilities as well as his personal, social and emotional development.**

It offers him the opportunity to initiate and develop an idea over an extended period of time; to initiate interaction and draw others into his game; to take the lead but also to cooperate and follow others; to communicate his ideas through speech and action; to recreate previous roles and

experiences; and to use speech to pretend and imagine and organise and sequence events.

**5 The EYFS guidance stresses the importance and value of supporting child-initiated play. Think about how you organise your setting to enable children to initiate their ideas and develop them in imaginative play. A Unique Child**

- Build strong relationships with families so that they are able to share with you the experiences and learning that takes place at home.
- Get to know your children well so that you can tune in and respond spontaneously to their ideas and help them make connections with their previous experience.
- Look for evidence of the child's levels of involvement and consider what this tells you about their emotional well-being and positive dispositions for learning.

**Positive Relationships**

- Provide opportunities for children to play collaboratively and to join in at their own level.
- Offer opportunities to play with children of different ages and levels of experience.
- Make sure that your own plans for activities don't get in the way of the children's ideas and motivations.

**Enabling Environments**

- Think about the way the environment is organised so that children have continuous and easy

**REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING**

*The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children* (manual and video), Ferre Laevers (ed). Research Centre for Experiential Education Belgium ([www.cego.be](http://www.cego.be))

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Learning Through Play – the three- to four-year-old'. For more information, visit Siren Films at [www.sirenfilm.co.uk](http://www.sirenfilm.co.uk) or call 0191 232 7900

access to fundamental equipment such as sand and blocks.

- Assess how easy it is for children to move and rearrange things to suit their purposes. Do they have ownership of the space so that they feel confident enough to make different arrangements?
- Think about how you arrange sand and water areas. Do they encourage children to solve problems and extend their own imaginative ideas? Are they overloaded with equipment?
- Incorporate familiar domestic objects from home into sand and water play. Ask parents for help and ideas to make sure these reflect the diversity of children's home lives.

**Learning and Development**

- Observe imaginative play and consider the levels of involvement and the strategies children use to engage others in their play.
- As imaginative role play can take place anywhere, be ready to respond to children's spontaneous urge to lose themselves in a world of 'let's pretend'.



**LINKS TO THE EYFS GUIDANCE**

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **PR 2.3** Supporting Learning
- **EE 3.1** Observation, Assessment and Planning
- **EE 3.3** The Learning Environment
- **L&D 4.3** Creativity and Critical Thinking