



Jamie knows exactly what she wants to do with the objects around her, without any direction from an adult. She pulls the cups apart and stands

them up with ease, suggesting previous experience, but balancing the curtain rings on top of each other proves more challenging

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

In line

In a safe environment where they feel secure, even very small children can enjoy constructive problem-solving and concentrate for surprising amounts of time, says *Anne O'Connor*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

Jamie (23 months) is on the floor, playing with a variety of everyday objects, including plastic cups, pots and large wooden curtain rings. Her grandmother is watching her nearby.

Jamie is very absorbed in her play, carefully manipulating and placing the items in ways that make sense to her. After lining up the cups and pots she carefully puts a ring in each one.

She shows persistence in placing the items exactly as she wants them, and setting them right when they topple over. She becomes frustrated when she cannot get the rings to stay on top of one another and looks to her grandmother for reassurance. She is easily soothed and returns to her self-chosen task. There is evidence of a range of schema.

Watching Jamie at play provides us with powerful evidence of the ability of very young children to persevere and concentrate.

She plays for more than ten minutes, with no direction from the adult, and with an obvious purpose in mind. She has set her own targets and perseveres until she is satisfied with the result. She is completely absorbed in the task she has set herself.

The skilful way she manipulates the cups as she pulls them apart and stands them up suggests that she has previous experience of similar materials. Not only has she mastered a range of skills that require fine motor control, she also appears to have some conceptual awareness of one-to-one correspondence as she care-

fully selects a ring for each pot or cup. Jamie is a perfect example of a child engaging in 'free-flow' play – wallowing in her past experiences and the technical prowess, competence, mastery and control she has acquired, just as Tina Bruce has described (in *The Excellence of Play*, ed Janet R Moyles, OUP, p193). In fact, she is working very hard at playing.

2 So what enables Jamie, at less than two years old, to engage in play at such a high level?

She is obviously feeling safe, secure and comfortable. She knows her grandmother is close by and that she is there to reassure her and help out if required.

She has a selection of familiar objects to play with and, quite importantly for the task she has set herself, she has lots of each of them. It is possible that she would not have extended herself to such an extent if there had only been a few of each.

Although an adult has provided the objects for her to explore, she is directing the play herself and is following it through to her own conclusion, as opposed to following an adult-led learning intention or planned outcome.

She is able to draw on her previous experience of household objects and materials and shows a good understanding of the properties of the various items.

Having lots of opportunities to explore and experiment with fine

motor control means that her skills are well developed, enabling her to successfully separate the cups and pots. When things don't go exactly as she wants (for example, the cup topples over) she doesn't immediately become stressed.

She has had enough positive early experiences to feel fairly comfortable when things go wrong, allowing her to stay relaxed enough to persevere with standing up the cup.

Later on when, despite her best efforts, her repeated attempts to stack the rings come to nothing, she shows her frustration and looks to a familiar and trusted adult to help her out. Once again, her positive early experiences mean that she can be easily soothed and is able to accept that things cannot always go her way.

She is allowed as much time and physical space as she needs to develop her spatial awareness and to pursue her interest in lining up the cups and exploring the objects.

Although not designed for play, the objects have plenty of intrinsic interest to attract and appeal to Jamie. They are perfect for a child whose schemas include 'trajectory', 'filing' and 'containment'.

3 Lining things up, as Jamie does, is a good example of a trajectory schema.

A schema is a pattern of repeated actions that 'describes a child's way, often their favourite way, of exploring the world at a given time. Schemas include a

combination of actions and ideas that shape a child's current approach to learning'.

While lining things up is a good example of a trajectory schema, putting things inside containers is an obvious example of 'containment' – although children may also like to contain themselves, by climbing into cupboards or hiding in boxes. 'Filing' involves children sorting and arranging objects in ways that make sense to them.

4 Think about the importance of exploratory play for babies and young children and how it fits in to practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Unique child

- Find out as much as you can about a child's schemas and think about the kinds of objects and materials that will support and develop their explorations.

- Involve and support parents in recognising and recording children's schemas.

- **Positive relationships** Find ways of showing children you are emotionally available to them even when they are engaged in independent play.

- **Enabling environments** Have quantities of familiar household objects readily available as part of your continuous provision.

- Use scrap projects or similar organisations to source a ready



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- User Notes Siren Films *Child Observation No6: Exploratory Play*
- *The Excellence of Play* ed Janet R Moyles (OUP)
- *Extending Thought in Young Children* by Chris Athey (Paul Chapman)
- *People Under Three* by Elinor Goldschmied and Sonia Jackson (Routledge)

FURTHER INFORMATION

The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Attachment and Holistic Development – The first year' (Observation Sequences with comprehensive user notes, latest release for 2008). For more information, visit Siren Films at www.sirenfilms.co.uk or call 0191 232 7900

supply of real-life items for sorting and exploratory play.

- Leave plenty of floor space available for children to explore trajectory schemas.
- Think about the value of leaving schematic displays in place over time, so that children can return to them as 'work in progress'.

Learning and development

- Take time to observe and listen to children playing on their own, and make sensitive judgements about when (and how) to interact with their play.
- Make sure that children have plenty of opportunities for sustained, uninterrupted play where they can pursue their interests and build concentration.
- Take note of the conceptual awareness children show at play. When a child chooses to explore a concept, use a skill or display a positive disposition in their play, they provide us with concrete evidence that their learning is embedded, because of the contextual meaning they bring to it.
- Record children's patterns and schematic arrangements with photographs and sketches. ■



LINKS TO THE EYFS GUIDANCE

- **UC 1.1.** Child Development
- **PR 2.3** Supporting Learning
- **EE 3.2** Supporting Every Child
- **L&D 4.1** Play and Exploration