



Skye watches Ella go down the slide and mirrors her actions kneeling at the bottom of the slide. She is ready to follow the older child's example

and try going down on her back for the first time. Taking such a risk will boost her self-confidence and sense of physical competence.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

In the mix

The benefits for children of playing in a mixed age group are explored by *Anne O'Connor*, with advice for practitioners on reinforcing it

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Skye is two years six months old. She has been coming to nursery for a while now and enjoys being outside in the garden. She likes to play with children slightly older than herself and observes them carefully. She goes over to the slide and watches Ella, who is a year older, slide confidently down on her front. Skye kneels beside her at the bottom of the slide and mirrors her actions almost exactly.

When Ella goes back on the slide she runs round to follow her. Ella comes down the slide on her back. This is a tricky manoeuvre for Skye and it is clear this is the first time she has tried it. She perseveres, cautiously twisting her body round until she is ready to launch herself down the slide. She laughs delightedly when she reaches the bottom and runs off to tell a practitioner.

The adult appreciates that this is a new physical development for Skye and responds with excitement to match Skye's own. Taking the risk has paid off and she returns to the slide to repeat the action with greater confidence.

GOOD PRACTICE

Two-year-old Skye is playing in the garden with children who are older than herself. She is a confident runner and this helps her to join in with some of their games. At other times she plays alone or with children nearer to her own age.

The opportunity to watch and join in with the play of older children spurs her on to try new things, to take risks and to physically stretch herself with new movement challenges. Skye knows what to do on a slide and uses it confidently in the regular way. Her careful observation of older children and the way they use the equipment gives her lots of stimulus for trying new ways to use the slide.

Watching Ellen come down confidently on her back stimulates Skye to try to do the same, even though she finds it a challenge. Being around older and more experienced children is one of the most natural ways to

FURTHER INFORMATION

The stills are taken from Siren Films 'Two Year Olds Outdoors' For more information, visit Siren Films at www.sirenfilm.co.uk or call 0191 232 7900

stimulate children's progression.

There is no prescribed way for settings to organise the grouping of children and increasingly, settings see the value of organising 'family groups' across the age ranges. There is still a greater tendency to group them by age, however. But thankfully, the likelihood of having shared outdoor space provides some much-needed opportunities to mix with children of different ages.

In her article 'The Benefits of Mixed Age Grouping,' Professor Lilian Katz describes the advantages of children having older role models in their play. 'In a mixed-age group, younger children are capable of participating and contributing to far more complex activities than they could initiate if they were by themselves. Once the older ones set up the activity, the younger ones can participate, even if they could not have initiated it.'

Sally Thomas also offers many sound reasons for considering family grouping in her book *Nurturing Babies and Young Children Under Four*.

2 Being around older children encourages Skye to take some manageable risks. Coming down the slide in a different way may not seem like much of a risk, but it is important that we don't underestimate the scale of this challenge for Skye at this stage of her development.

She is familiar with how it feels to come down the slide in the conven-

tional way, but coming down on her back facing away from the direction in which she is moving will involve very different physical sensations. These are valuable in helping develop her vestibular system and giving her the opportunity to orientate herself when upside down.

She also has to manoeuvre herself into a totally different position at the top of the slide. She takes time to do this, carefully twisting herself round and gripping the side for security. Having grasped the urge to do it when there is no adult available for support, she manages all this independently.

She is unlikely to hurt herself, but for Skye this is a moment of emotional as well as physical courage. The risk pays off as she reaches the bottom of the slide with a sense of achievement and pride in her physical competence. She is learning that she is physically robust – and brave – and this is important for her confidence and self-esteem.

3 Some children may be much more physically cautious than Skye, and there may be a variety of reasons for this.

For some older children, it may simply be that they did not have the same satisfying and encouraging experiences that Skye is enjoying. Some children may be overly cautious because they have tuned in to adult anxieties about physical risk. Others may have had an unsettling experience, or indeed hurt themselves and

not had the sensitive care and reassurance that they needed afterwards to override their fears of taking the risk again.

An important role of the practitioner is to pay close attention to children's movement play and the ways in which they respond to physical challenge. Recognising and acknowledging the risks they take at their own level is important to building their self-confidence, because presenting them with too much challenge can undermine this.

Tuning in to 'where they are at' in their awareness of their own bodies, helps us to gauge what experiences they need more of, and where we can encourage them to take risks and challenge themselves with a higher likelihood of success.

4 Skye learns from Ella by mirroring and copying her movements. This is an important feature of physical development and something that we instinctively do around babies.

A baby will perform an action and derives positive feedback (both emotionally and cognitively) when someone else mirrors it back to them. This takes a step further when a baby mimics a movement that they see someone else doing and again receives positive feedback (and probably repetition of the movement) when it is noticed.

It is worth remembering how valuable mirroring is as a tool for explor-



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- *Playing and Learning Outdoors: Making Provision for High Quality Experiences in the Outdoor Environment* by Jan White (Nursery World/Routledge Essential Guides for Early Years Practitioners)
- Sally Thomas *Nurturing Babies and Young Children Under Four* (Heinemann)
- Lilian Katz 'The Benefits of Mixed Age Grouping', at: <http://ericae.net/ericdb/ED382411.htm>
- *Nursery World* series on physical development by Anne O'Connor and Anna Daly, www.nurseryworld.co.uk/go/physical-development

ing movement play and exploration. Take the time to notice the interesting things children do with their bodies, and try sometimes to mirror them. This can be subtle and discreet, but eventually the child will notice what you are doing and enjoy the thrill of directing your movements. This can be a fascinating and purposeful lead-in to exploring the potential of dance, and dance-like movements, in spontaneous ways around the setting.

5 Slides often feature in outdoor play spaces for children. Skye's experience shows that they can provide valuable opportunities for challenge and movement exploration with young children.

There is, however, a tendency for slides to be fixed pieces of equipment, and this can limit their usefulness. As well as the more usual playground-style slides, look out for equipment that has separate climbing and sliding components (such as planks and A-frames) that allow you to devise and create a variety of structures in collaboration with the children. ■



LINKS TO THE EYFS

- UC 1.1 Child Development
- UC 1.3 Keeping Safe
- UC 1.4 Health and Well-being
- PR 3.2 Supporting Learning
- EE 3.3 The Learning Environment