



At the beach, Dexter observes birds and explores digging in the sand and handling natural objects found there. Being able to manipulate objects

while standing is a beneficial experience, as his feet are still learning to negotiate different surfaces, and he may still give way to crawling.

## PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# On the beach

New sights and new textures are made familiar for a baby with careful adult interest, says *Anne O'Connor*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

Dexter (12 months) and his mother are at the beach. His mother points to the birds and Dexter follows her gaze and says 'bap'. This is the word that he uses for birds – and also for dogs. She understands and repeats 'bap' back to him, as well as using the word 'bird'.

They find a good place to play that is just the right height for Dexter to stand and investigate the shells and the sand. He has also found a stick and he spends a lot of time poking it into the sand, prodding shells with it and scratching it on different surfaces. He pushes things into the sand to hide them and then finds them again. Dexter has been walking for a month or so, but he finds the soft sand hard-

er to negotiate. He happily crawls along until he finds a surface that can support his new-found walking skills.

## GOOD PRACTICE

**Dexter is beginning to categorise the things in his world, in a very personal way, by using the same word 'bap' when he sees things he recognises.**

The study of 'infant categorisation', or how babies make sense of their world and all the animate (living) and inanimate things in it, is an area of child development that has kept researchers very busy, particularly since the 1970s.

We know that our brains generally like to categorise things and that there seems to be good sense in this – how complicated would the world be if we had to learn about each new thing independently of the things we had learned before, rather than by grouping them in categories?

Learning to 'generalise' and create categories about vehicles or animals, for example, frees up our brains so that we don't have to learn everything from scratch each time we come across a new example.

**2 To find out at what stage babies begin to categorise objects, researchers have had to experiment with ways of recognising when a baby thinks they are seeing something new.**

This has traditionally been done by watching what a baby chooses to gaze at for any length of time. The researchers' belief is that babies like looking at things that are novel to them and will look longer at these



than at something they think they have seen before.

More recent research, such as the work of Oxford University Babylab, has focused on measuring brain activity and trying to understand the mechanism and processes at work when babies begin to categorise and how it links with language development.

Dexter's mother's response to his intention to communicate with her is very important. She acknowledges and validates his efforts by repeating his word 'bap', as well as using the correct term.

**3 Another developmental stage that intrigues researchers is the awareness of object permanence.**

This is defined as the ability to know that objects continue to exist even when we can't see, touch or hear them, and it played an important part in Piaget's theory of cognitive development.

Maria Robinson explores object permanence in her book, *From Birth to One – The year of opportunity*. She writes: 'By about four to eight months, babies can find a partly hidden object and will "track" something that is moving vertically. However, they still do not look for something if it has been hidden, even if they see it happening.' We believe this is because babies do not yet have that understanding that something continues to exist even if they can't see it.

'As with all aspects of learning,'

writes Ms Robinson, 'the qualitative leap of understanding that something unseen still exists requires a great deal of learning rehearsal: our brains need to assimilate a whole range of experiences before we can grasp even a rudimentary sense of an object's continuing existence.'

By nine months, though, this is beginning to happen and Dexter has clearly arrived at this stage. Sand is such a perfect medium for babies and young children to experiment with hiding and finding things, whether at the beach, outdoors in the sand pit or just in a tray on the floor indoors.

**4 Dexter is still a 'wobbly walker' but his mother gives him lots of opportunities to practise his new skill.**

Outdoors at the seaside, there are lots of different surfaces to negotiate, and sometimes it just makes better sense to crawl! He moves between the soft sand, the rubberised surface of the walkway and the concrete path, building up not just his muscles but also his co-ordination and balancing skills.

It is good practice to provide a variety of surfaces in settings (indoors and out) for babies to negotiate and practise their walking skills, but we must also make the most of the opportunities that trips out into the local area can provide. Taking babies in their buggies for 'walks' doesn't give them much opportunity for actual walking!



## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Oxford University Babylab, <http://babylab.psy.ox.ac.uk/>
- White, Jan, *Playing and Learning Outdoors: Making provision for high-quality experiences in the outdoor environment* (Nursery World/ Routledge)
- Robinson, Maria (2003) *From Birth to One – The year of opportunity* (OUP)



## FURTHER INFORMATION

The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Babies Outdoors'. For more information, visit Siren Films at [www.sirenfilms.co.uk](http://www.sirenfilms.co.uk) or call 0191 232 7900

## 5

**There is something special about playing on a beach. The smells, sights and sounds, the combination of**

**textures of sand, pebbles, shells, open sky and sea air, all bring something special to the experience in all kinds of weather.**

We are not all fortunate enough to be able to take our children to the beach regularly, but we can still provide in our settings similar kinds of sand play opportunities. Think about ways you can make some of your sand provision more like a beach. Sand is fundamental part of continuous provision in most early childhood settings. As Jan White says in *Playing and Learning Outdoors – Making provision for high-quality experiences in the outdoor environment*, 'Sand is a beautiful, therapeutic substance that can be experienced more fully by sitting or lying in it, with hands and bare feet, feeling the cool and delicate sensations on the skin or trickling it through our fingers and toes.' Create as big an area for sand play as you can, and then the grown-ups can make the most of its therapeutic properties too. ■



## LINKS TO THE EYFS

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **PR 3.3** Supporting Learning
- **EE 3.3** The Learning Environment
- **L&D 4.1** Play and Exploration
- **L&D 4.2** Active Learning