

Step 4 - Train Staff

You are already working to improve children's opportunities for play, simply by creating an enriched environment for them to explore. As staff, you may wonder to what extent you should involve yourself in their play. Below are some principles to guide you. These are taken from an professional approach to supporting children's play, known as playwork. If you'd like to learn more, take a look at the resources list at the end of this manual.

Keep a light touch

When making changes in the environment, or circulating during play, practice working as subtly as possible. If you see that a material may be needed soon, you can provide it 'invisibly'. For example, if a child is building and you can see that soon they'll be out of tape, you can leave a roll of tape nearby. It will be there when they are ready.



Waiting to be invited

It is easy for many adults to walk straight into children's play and ask them questions about what they're doing or why. In some educational settings, this is encouraged. However, we prefer not to interrupt children who are playing happily and instead wait to be invited. Of course, this is not the case if there is an immediate serious danger.

Respond to cues

An invitation, or 'play cue', can take many different forms! We read and respond to cues all the time, though we may not usually call them such. A child might look over their shoulder at us, squeal and giggle and run away. It is an easy guess that they want us to chase them. When we respond to a child's cues, we are saying 'yes' to something that comes from deep inside them, something which is very important to them in the moment.

Challenging behavior

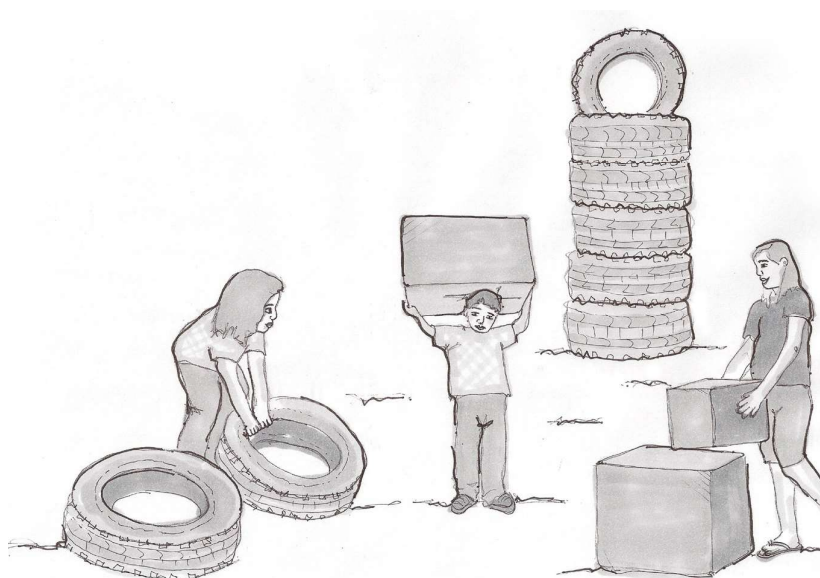
Sometimes, children will push their way into other's games aggressively, or seek our attention in ways we find difficult to manage. Asking ourselves what experiences they are seeking can suggest some ways we might help or subtly redirect them. For example, if a child is throwing rocks too close to other children, we quietly challenge them to hit a tree - one that is *coincidentally* in the opposite direction.

Rough and tumble or play fighting is very important for children, and a great way to learn social and physical boundaries. However, those without much experience might find that they need practice in how to keep this wrestling playful. In a mixed age setting, they are better able to find partners who can match or exceed their strength, but in the absence of peers we can offer to play with them, being careful to let them stay in charge of the game.

We want to be clear that no one should provide opportunities or responses which they are uncomfortable with - but that, through reflection, we may see ways to expand our skills and practice.

Observe, remember, reflect

We were all children once. It's good to spend time remembering how it felt to be a child, what we loved and feared when we were small. We can use all this information, alongside our professional training, to help us improve environments for children's play and be more understanding of what we see them do. All these different pieces of information are brought together through reflective practice, which we do both alone and within our teams. Reflection works best when we are patient, honest and brave with ourselves and our colleagues.



An important note about settings without supervision

If your setting will include loose parts but limited or no supervision by adults, think very carefully about the materials you supply. What might be considered appropriate depends greatly upon the children you work with, and their previous experiences.

Commonly, settings with very young children do not set out any containers of water which could be a drowning hazard. In areas where children have limited experience of play with loose parts, thin ropes may present strangulation risks. Children who are not usually allowed to fight with sticks will struggle at first to know how hard is 'too hard' and so play fights might turn real at first. If you feel uncomfortable with the possibilities offered by a loose part, provide something else instead. However, if you are working with children who are often free to play with all sorts of loose parts, or who have experience using hand tools and navigating the landscape unattended, these concerns may seem absurd.

You know those children best, so think carefully about what could happen when you are not around. Take very few risks at the beginning, since children often respond to the novelty of loose parts by playing very hard for a while. Remember that you can always bring new, different materials later on.

Reflective questions to consider each day:

- ☐ What went well today?
- ☐ What could have gone better?
- ☐ When did I involve myself in play, and how did I make that decision?
- ☐ Was that intervention in the best interests of children's play? How do I know that?
- ☐ What might I do differently next time?



Maintaining self & staff

Working with children can be an exhausting job. Obviously, it is one that we love - but we want to encourage everyone to remember that you are also a resource for children's play, and that you need maintaining too!

Make sure that you find time to focus on your own needs. Making sure that you get enough sleep, eat proper meals, and have colleagues to talk with is personally and professionally important. Finding time for your own play is also essential, if you are going to support children in a healthy way.

Reflection is the key process by which we maintain our mental balance, as well as our relationships with colleagues and the children. This means that we spend time thinking carefully about what happened during the day, how we acted and why, and whether there were things we would do differently next time. Reflection allows us to process our experiences, and then move past them to try anew tomorrow.

Checklist:

- ☐ Looked at the space and what it currently offers
- ☐ Gathered materials that children can play with freely
- ☐ Figured out a storage system
- ☐ Talked with colleagues about how children can use these materials
- ☐ Decided who is responsible for tidying materials away, and what can be left out