



Every Child a Talker

Building language outdoors: construction play

Children need to play outdoors. However sometimes we are not clear about the best way to get involved in their play: in order to make the most of their enthusiasm, and particularly to develop their language and learning. One of the main confusions we have is between **unstructured** and **'child-initiated'** play.

Unstructured play is play without adult support. "While play without adults can be rich and purposeful, at times it can become chaotic or repetitive activity which is 'hands-on, brains-off'".

Child-initiated play often comes about where children have chosen to take part in activities where adults have provided "the environment for play, and where they interact sensitively." (Quotes from *Learning, playing and interacting: good practice in the EYFS*, DCSF 2009)

Practitioners can sometimes assume that their role in outdoor play is to get involved as little as possible, for fear of *interfering* in children's play. I suggest that adults *do* need to be involved, but in different ways at different times.

We can use a **construction play project** to show how adults and children can get involved in the most valuable ways.

This project took place in a nursery setting with a sandpit, and an area with a soft surface and tarmac. Our aim was to involve children for as long as possible in construction play. There were two groups of children: 18 months to 2 years, and 3s to 4s. With the older children we wanted to develop their language and cooperation through role-playing being builders. With the younger children we wanted to help them explore the materials.

Ingredients

- 2 adults minimum: (This activity will not work with one adult!)
- Sand (lots of). Sand can be in a sand pit, but adding a builders' tray will be best. If there is no sand pit, use 2 builders' trays
- Real buckets (black is fine, but black, orange and silver add to the chances for language development).
- Small 'real' tools. Trowels are available in plastic and metal. Garden centres often sell small metal tools for children. Also look out for tools for elderly gardeners, which are often small and lighter versions of larger tools. I got a great mini shovel from my local hardware shop, which children love. It is important to have real-looking tools. (Plastic buckets and spades will not generate role-play.)
- Stones of different sizes (from the garden centre) and containers to play with and store them in.
- Plastic plant trays of different sizes.
- A down pipe and a drainpipe.
- Offcuts of wood (from the local joiner's)
- Spirit levels, tape measures and spanners.
- Plastic 'hard hats' and 'high viz' reflective vests (children's size)
- A selection of bricks (real or play bricks, or both)

Construction with the 2 to 5 year olds:

Before...



... during...



...and after!! (Well, just before we tidied up!)



What happened with the 2 to 5 year olds.

The setting has free-flow access to the outdoors. Most children were very keen to join in. However we restricted the numbers to six at a time, to ensure quality play and interaction. We helped the children to understand this by only having six hats and six high viz vests, and as we were builders in a dangerous place everyone had to wear a vest, (the hat was optional).

Much of the children's time was taken up with shovelling the sand from the sand pit and builders' tray into the buckets. Having real tools and buckets was a very big hit for the children. Surprisingly, sweeping up was also popular!

Children made walls with the bricks, and one girl spontaneously filled in the holes in each brick with wet sand before she added another brick on top. An adult helped her with this. Some children spent the hour mainly digging, shovelling and making giant sandcastles. Others moved on to building with the large bricks, and experimenting with the spirit levels.

None of these activities were 'unstructured' because this was a new activity, and the adults needed to show the children how to use the tools and the space, how to share, and to help to build the sandcastles. In time, this could become 'unstructured', as adult support would need to be minimal. However I would always suggest some adult involvement, to help children's language and social skills (and particularly for those learning English as an additional language).

The children had another session in the afternoon, and we extended this by introducing the downpipe and drainpipe. With adult support the children became focused on rolling the stones down the pipe: first into a metal bucket and then into a large plant pot tray. We added some water to the activity and this further developed the children's involvement. I needed to be 'in charge' of the pipe, as there was a lot of competition for who was going to hold it, and the less confident children were in danger of being left out. Also I wanted to model some language with children who needed language support. Most importantly I wanted to model what children could do, so that they could create sessions of their own like these in the future, with the adults gradually reducing their involvement.

It was particularly noticeable that the children learning EAL were fully involved by copying the simple repeated phrases we used like 'Down it goes! Ready steady... go! Get a stone. Get another stone. Has it gone down?' etc).

Practitioners were able to involve the children in detailed conversations about walls, spirit levels, and anything else that the children were interested in.

What happened with the 18 month to 2 year olds.

Before the session with the younger children we tidied the space and reduced the amount of resources (taking away the large buckets and bricks and setting out the plant pot trays, and bags of stones.) Our aim was to see how long the children could be involved for, and how we could support their child-initiated play through sensitive interaction.

The children went straight for the sand, and surprisingly (at least for me) wanted to use the large tools. The main activities were scooping the sand, filling pots, buckets and trays with sand, doing the same with the stones, and piling up small wood offcuts. There were many opportunities for spontaneous chat and commenting about what the children were doing. The children's involvement was total.

Was this unstructured play or child-initiated? I think it was child-initiated. We provided the environment for them to play: in any way they chose. We followed their lead, and supported them in their exploration. We also provided them with support for their developing language through commenting about what they were doing and responding to what they said.

Taking the project forward

Children are naturally drawn to playing in sand. Play can be unstructured (e.g. filling and emptying and shovelling for the sake of it, or develop into sophisticated role-play, where children are pretending to be builders, but don't need any adult support.) But in order to reach the point where children can explore and role-play on their own, adults may need to spend a lot of time supporting child-initiated play, such as in ways described above.

One way to build on the success of this activity would be to make certain resources available before each session, and allow the children to build up their repertoire of play activities. For example, we noted that the real tools and buckets were very popular. On the next session these could be put out, and the children supported in their play (probably mainly helping them to share and cooperate together).

Each day we could introduce more resources, such as stones of different sizes, real bricks, and planks of wood. If the resources are stored carefully, with the children being shown how and where they are stored, they can choose different resources to use. Adults can support this play by role-playing being builders themselves, or taking a trip to a building site. Having story books and information books about building close to the construction play area can add another dimension: giving the children more ideas, as well as encouraging them to share books.

Ask parents to provide bits and pieces to add to your store of construction materials. This helps to involve the children more, especially if they know that a piece of downpipe came from their garden! Find out what the different items are called, and use the exact vocabulary when playing with the children.

Introducing real tools can add a whole new dimension to play. I have a set of spanners and wrenches, spirit levels and a tool for spreading plaster (that I can never remember the name of!) that is very popular for smoothing the sand in the sand tray. When introducing new resources, it is likely that adult involvement will need to be increased: to show the children the possibilities of the tool, and also to help with sharing and cooperation. Eventually children should be spontaneously involved in this type of construction play. NB It will always be important to plan to have an adult involved with, or at the least supervising, this type of play. There are so many opportunities for developing language and social skills, but also the need for awareness of possible risks: especially when real tools and large planks of wood are involved!

One sure-fire way of helping children take this play forward for themselves is to introduce figures such as Action Man, dolls, Bob the Builder etc. Give the children a plastic 'Makka Pakka', and suggest they build him a cave, and the children will be well away!

For an account of a project that involved children in construction play and mark making visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk (in the Every Child a Talker/language and mark making section)

The aims for younger children would be to allow them to explore the resources in their own way, varying between a lot of adult support and interaction to minimal amounts (to the point that it can be unstructured). Adults can vary the activities by adding new resources, such as different sizes and shapes of buckets, different lengths of wood, and water in different quantities.

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