

Creative Thinking and Learning Project



Creating a narrative and problem-solving through junk modelling

Sheringham
Nursery School and
Children's Centre

Written by Anni McTavish

"This booklet is about a project based at Sheringham Nursery School in the London Borough of Newham, which inspired creative practice throughout the learning community"

**With a foreword by Nancy Stewart
Early Learning Consultancy**

Review by Cathy Gunning, Pedagogic Lead for Early Education

Creativity is instinctive in young children, and this booklet is about a project based at Sheringham Nursery School in the London Borough of Newham, which inspired creative practice throughout the learning community. It tells a story about the development of creativity and critical thinking and the impact on young children and their families.

This project focuses on **creating and thinking critically** – one of the characteristics of effective teaching and learning, so crucial to early learning. Often practitioners ask for help and support to equip an environment creatively. They want children to be able to freely explore their ideas, and seek confidence in providing these opportunities, as well as challenging their own creative thinking.

This project gives us a wonderful opportunity to delve deeper into creative thinking and learning and examine what it means in practice. We can see that focusing on areas with lower EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage 2017) outcomes can strongly impact children and their communities. As well as telling us the story, this booklet provides us with evidence of the crucial role of playful, experiential activities through child-initiated and adult-guided learning.

The reader will gain a deeper understanding of **creative thinking and learning**, with an emphasis on the value of an enabling environment. It also highlights the importance of quality interactions, for example, making time for special one-to-one conversations between the key person and their children.

Anni expertly equips those who work with young children with many invaluable ideas to implement, inspire and improve creative experiences. This booklet is a great resource, full of easy ideas to develop your practice. Practitioners who participated in the project gained confidence, and shared their enthusiasm with parents and carers about the importance of creative thinking and learning.



Twister plate printing – exploring techniques during training session

Contents

Foreword by Nancy Stewart, Principal Consultant at the Early Learning Consultancy	4
Introduction and aims of the project	5
Why it's important to nurture young children's creativity and critical thinking	8
How the project developed	10
Creative experiences developed as part of the project	16
Developing ideas for small group times	33
Progress in the here and now <i>Case studies from the project</i> <i>Safety and risk benefit assessment</i>	37
Documenting progress in action <i>Key fob – progress in action</i>	42
The impact of the project in the words of the participants <i>Difference for the children</i> <i>Difference for the practitioners</i>	45
Further information	47
Acknowledgements	47

Creative Thinking and Learning

Foreword by Nancy Stewart, principal consultant at the Early Learning Consultancy

The most important resource in early childhood education is the educator, and this complex role doesn't come with a set of simple instructions. Effective professionals manage a web of knowledge, insight, emotion, skill and intentions within an ever-shifting context. This inspiring account of a project aimed at developing children's creative learning and critical thinking amply demonstrates that the way to success is supporting professionals to develop their own creative and critical thinking, as they ask and seek answers to their own questions.

It also shows the power of working together, with an excellent nursery school as the hub at the centre of a range of settings and childminders, all working to push their own boundaries. An ideal model of professional learning goes far beyond attending a training course - deeper and sustained change occurs when training is linked to reflecting with colleagues, choosing an area to address, exploring approaches, modelling, peer observations, and mentoring conversations. This takes time, clear focus, and flexibility, but this project shows the investment richly rewarded.

We see here the inter-connectedness of early years practice. A close lens focused on children's development of the crucial Characteristics of Effective Learning provides a way in, but settings' explorations span outwards to include emotional and physical environments, various areas of learning and development, moment-to-moment interactions and feedback, planned stimulus activities, tuning into children's fascinations, and communicating with parents. Activities outlined here provide practical ideas for stimulating creative experiences, always offered with the important rider that **how** they are used is more important than the details of **what** is provided.

Practitioners describe their own learning and the impact on the children, while the case studies of individual children's responses are a delight, making the value of such high quality professional development abundantly clear.

Nancy Stewart



Child-initiated work from an interest in pirates

Creative Thinking and Learning

Introduction

From Sept 2014 to July 2015, practitioners from Sheringham Nursery, together with seven of the Manor Park Early Years Forum (MPEYF) group of settings and the childminder network, explored different ways of working to develop and foster children's creative learning and critical thinking skills.

The project followed a simple, but effective process:

- Professional dialogue and reflection about what creative thinking and learning looks like in practice. Discussion on how best to support these processes, and how to incorporate new strategies into the ongoing work of the hub setting, Sheringham Nursery. This included mentoring for a small group of practitioners.
- A one day training for managers and practitioners from the MPEYF group of settings.
- A half day follow-up visit from the consultant to each setting to support practitioners to develop an aspect of their practice linked to creative thinking and learning.
- Short, experiential training sessions with gap tasks for the childminder network, with a focus on observing, assessing and planning for creativity and critical thinking.
- Connecting the work with the parent and toddler group and Children's Centre Creche.
- End of project celebration events, with evaluations from participants to reflect on the impact for children, families and practitioners.

Aims of the Project

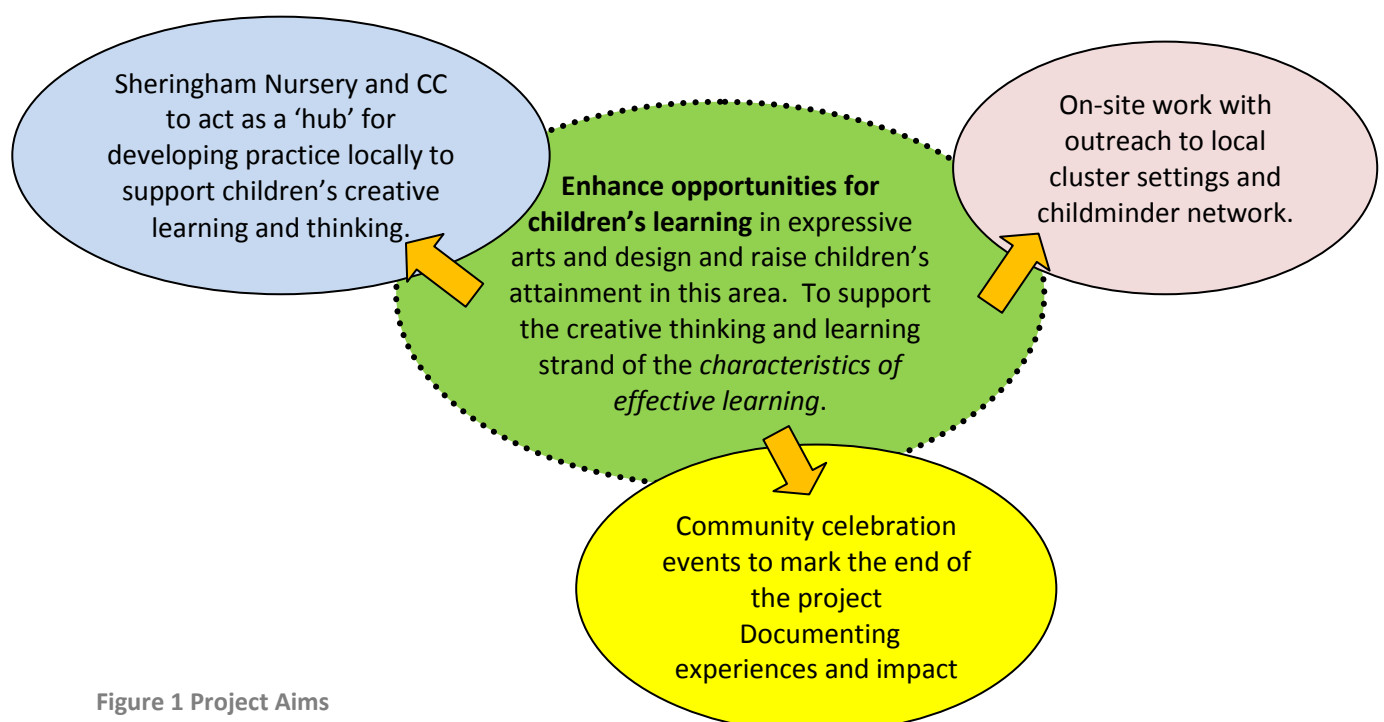
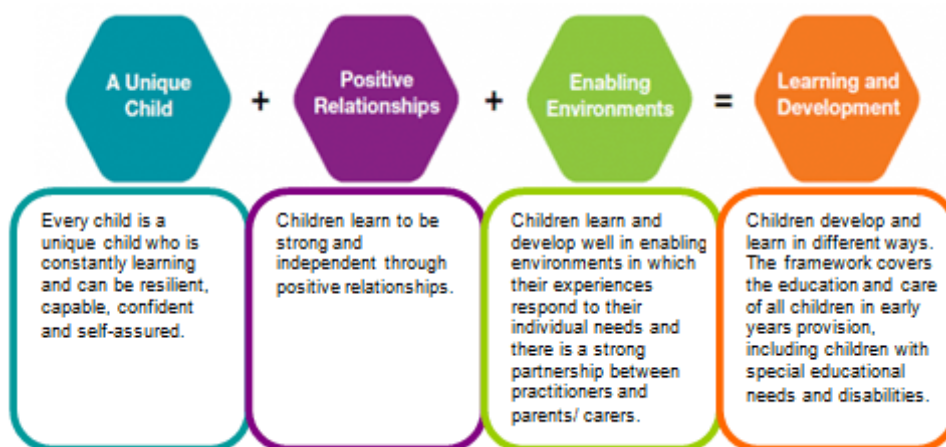


Figure 1 Project Aims

This document illustrates many of the practical arts-based experiences that nurtured children's creative and critical thinking over the year, together with strategies that practitioners and families developed to support children's learning. It also includes case studies of creative thinking and learning in action across other domains of learning.

The Early Years Foundation Stage

The overarching principles of the early years' foundation stage were the starting point for this project:



Beginning with children's interests and valuing their contributions, the project built on the positive relationships between families, children, practitioners and settings. A wide variety of exciting and enjoyable arts experiences were planned to support and inspire new learning. It was understood that both children and adults would be learning together, exploring new ideas, and developing confidence in their creativity and creative thinking along the way.

We also emphasised that creativity and critical thinking could develop across **all areas of learning and development**, and was certainly not something solely connected to the arts. *(The case studies on pages 37-42 illustrate children's creative thinking and learning across a variety of different experiences and cover all areas of learning and development).*

The Characteristics of Effective Learning

We held a focus on the characteristics of effective learning; in particular, the strand of **creating and thinking critically**.

"In planning and guiding children's activities, practitioners must reflect on the different ways that children learn and reflect these in their practice. **Three characteristics of effective teaching and learning are:**

- **Playing and exploring** - children investigate and experience things, and 'have a go';
- **Active learning** - children concentrate and keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoy achievements; and
- **Creating and thinking critically** - children have and develop their own ideas, make links between ideas, and develop strategies for doing things" ([1.9 p10 EYFS 2017](#)).

Creating and Thinking Critically – *thinking*

Having their own ideas

- Thinking of ideas
- Finding ways to solve problems
- Finding new ways to do things

Making links

- Making links and noticing patterns in their experience
- Making predictions
- Testing their ideas
- Developing ideas of grouping, sequences, cause and effect

Choosing ways to do things

- Planning, making decisions about how to approach a task, solve a problem and reach a goal
- Checking how well their activities are going
- Changing strategy as needed
- Reviewing how well the approach worked

In the hub setting, we also focussed on two specific areas of learning where data had shown that outcomes were comparatively lower: Understanding the world - people and communities, and Expressive arts and design - being imaginative. This allowed us to target particular aspects of provision and nurture and explore these through the prime areas of learning and development: -

- **Personal, social and emotional development**
- **Communication and language**
- **Physical development**

Some of the ways we did this included:

- Encouraging children to talk about their own home and community life, both one to one and in small groups. This was often facilitated through annotating children's drawings or scribing for them in homemade books.
- A simple rhyme and homemade book of children's photographs (based on the popular book, Brown Bear Brown Bear What Do You See? By Eric Carle) helped children become familiar with each other's names during group times.
- Children also went on outings to the local community, visiting shops, museums and further afield to the Tate Modern.
- The celebration events at the end of the project gave many families the opportunity to spend time in the setting, join-in with art activities and meet other families.
- New and novel imaginative role play spaces were developed, particularly outdoors, including a shoe shop, a circus area, an ice-cream shop and a three bears' house.
- An adult-guided experience focusing on well known artists' landscape paintings inspired children's artwork on large scale pieces outdoors.
- One of the interests that really took off was dancing. Children enjoyed a new movement and dance area outdoors with the CD player and music, as well as

creating their own dancing sticks with ribbons and sticks from the garden. New imaginative rhymes and story games were introduced, and these are detailed further on pages 33-36, '[developing ideas for small group times](#)'.



Being Imaginative: developing role-play outdoors

Why it's important to nurture young children's creativity and critical thinking

Young children are remarkable learners. They have strong internal drives to relate to others, to develop their competence, independence and understanding of the world.

When we support children's curiosity, their desire to plan and succeed in challenges that they have set for themselves and make their own decisions, they become *self-regulated learners*. They surpass other children who develop more subject-based knowledge early on, but are less engaged in the actual process of learning (Moylett 2014).

Self-regulation also involves being able to manage your feelings and behaviour and the ability to reflect and be aware of your thinking and understanding (thinking about thinking - *metacognition*). These skills, as well as other positive characteristics, such as self-belief, independence, concentration and persistence, are known to be significant factors not only in children's academic success, but also in their future life chances. (HighScope 2005, Eppe 2004, Dweck 2010, Bandura 1994).

These important skills and dispositions are recognised in the characteristics of effective learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage (2017). The emphasis is not just on **what** children are learning (subject knowledge), but also on **how** they are learning. This supports the belief that children are better prepared to cope and respond to a fast-changing world if they are socially and emotionally resilient *and* confident and creative thinkers.

The **creative thinking and learning** project involved planning to support both child-initiated play and the introduction of new, vibrant and enjoyable adult-guided experiences. Research tells us that the best outcomes for children's learning occur when there is a mixture of:

Child-initiated play, actively supported by adults together with adult-guided play: focused learning with playful, rich experiential activities.



From Learning, Playing and Interacting (2009)

Sensitive interactions and guidance will enable children to make the most progress in their learning. These skilled interactions are crucial in order to support children's creativity and critical thinking skills. We also wanted to acknowledge the many varied things we do as teachers and that it is the *quality* of teaching that makes a difference. The varied and holistic nature of teaching is outlined as a footnote in the [Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook](#) (p 35 August 2015):

'...It takes account of the equipment adults provide and the attention given to the physical environment, as well as the structure and routines of the day that establish expectations. Integral to teaching is how practitioners assess what children know, understand and can do, as well as taking account of their interests and dispositions to learn (characteristics of effective learning), and how practitioners use this information to plan children's next steps in learning and monitor their progress.'

The specific strategies that practitioners developed and worked on throughout the project are detailed in the **model of developing practice** overleaf, with examples of how this happened in practical terms throughout.

Key reference documents

- [Early Years Foundation Stage \(EYFS\) 2017](#)
- [Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage](#)
- [Learning, Playing and Interacting](#), Good Practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage 2009 The National Strategies Early Years, DCSF Publications
- Goswami, U. (2015) *Children's Cognitive Development and Learning*, Cambridge Primary Review Trust, Research Briefing 3.
- Moylett, H. (ed.) (2014) *Characteristics of Effective Early Learning: helping young children become learners for life*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Siraj, I., Kingston, D. and Melhuish, E. (2015) *Assessing Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care. Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) Scale for 2–5 year-olds provision*. London: UCL IOE press
- Stewart, N. (2011) *How Children Learn: The Characteristics of Effective Early Learning*. British Association of Early Childhood Education

How the project developed

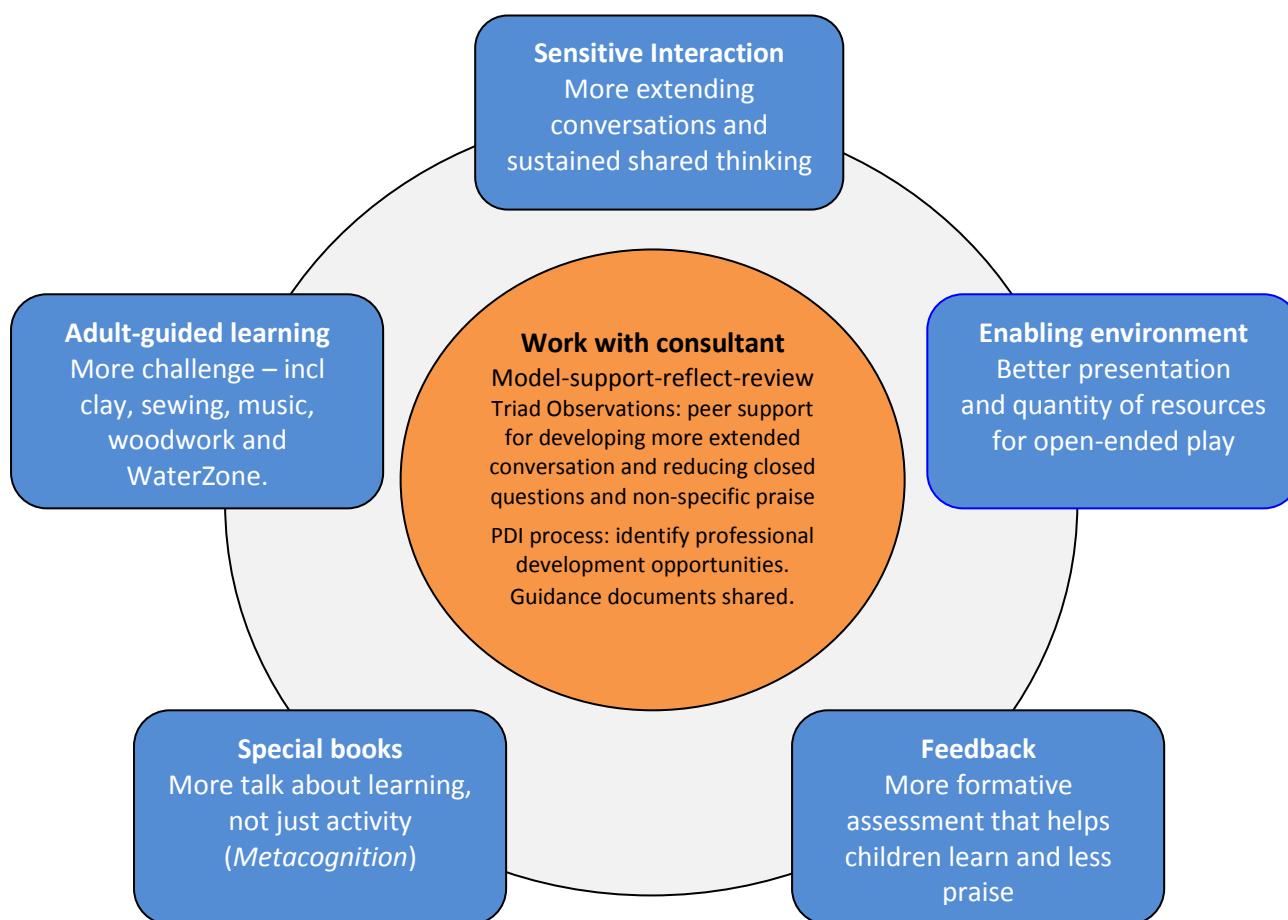


Figure 2 Model of developing practice

Sensitive interaction

Through training, staff meetings and informal mentoring conversations, practitioners discussed and reflected on children's creativity and critical thinking. Short film clips and case studies of children's play and learning were helpful in illustrating and deepening understanding of these characteristics. These professional conversations informed discussion about different interactions and how these could help (or hinder) the process of creativity and creative thinking, and how practitioners might most helpfully provide **feedback** to children about their learning. *See below.*

Enabling Environment

Young children's learning depends on both a positive **emotional and physical** environment. Responsive and sensitive interactions grounded in warm, respectful and loving relationships generate a high-quality **emotional environment**. Time, space and companionship, with a balance of child-initiated play and adult-guided experiences, is also crucial. Sufficient materials, resources and equipment that invites open-ended play, with access to the natural world, helps to create a positive **physical environment**.

Part of the project therefore, involved reviewing both these elements. We looked at developing our interactions and attentiveness to children's fascinations, as well as reviewing

space, room organisation and materials. Some settings decided to reorganise their provision, de-cluttering and re-thinking how they presented materials. Others created new areas to support ongoing interests, or planned familiar activities in different ways. One childminder set up a creative space on a large cloth on her floor, rather than on a table as she usually did. As a result, the extra space and relaxed atmosphere meant that her children became more engaged, with different ages joining-in and collaborating together.

In the hub setting, exciting role-play spaces were set up outdoors and a new area for transient art was created in a quiet corner of the garden. The twos' room decided to focus on mathematical development and how to extend children's creative thinking in this area. This included re-establishing an outdoor kitchen and making use of existing resources in new ways. With the help of their site manager, a small compost bin was made, in order to enhance the children's understanding of garden waste and recycling. This also gave them a very practical solution to the leaves and cut branches created by the new kitchen.



Talking and thinking – how big should the new compost bin be?

The childminder group met regularly for short training sessions and continued to develop their practice in-between with the support of their co-ordinator. This was particularly successful through the introduction of the 'Explore and Wonder' box, devised to bring in more natural, easily accessible play materials to enhance creative learning. (*Explore and Wonder Box, p 17*)

After taking part in the training, the cluster group took new experiences and ideas back into their settings. During the consultant visit, they were able to reflect on the changes they had made and how their interactions were developing to support creative thinking. Many of the settings developed new ideas for small group times, for example, how to incorporate songs, movement and creative story-making. Some of these are detailed on pages 33-36.

Feedback

A key strategy that we wanted to develop was our feedback in response to children's learning. Avoiding more 'results' focused praise or unspecific phrases such as "well done", we concentrated on tuning into what children were really interested in, when they were most engaged in their learning, and the amount of effort involved. Phrases like "I can see

you're trying really hard to get this to work..." or "I notice you've added some new patterns here..." or simply attentively watching or waiting, quietly signalled the adult's interest in children's thinking and learning.

Practitioner: *"I'd just got the space hoppers out of the cupboard for the children – I must have said something like 'here's the space hoppers'. I'm glad I didn't say anything else, because they had some great ideas..."*

Child 1: "Why's it called a space-hopper?"

Practitioner: "Mm....."

Child 2: "Cos the builders' make them in the fixer shop"

Child 1: "Cos it's from the moon!"



Time to study small details before creating with transient art

Research shows that we develop what Dweck (2010) calls a **growth mindset** when we are praised for effort and hard work (rather than praise for the end product or cleverness) and that this helps to build and sustain motivation to learn. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained* is a good motto. A growth mindset means we are more likely to attempt things that are difficult or challenging, and believe intelligence can increase through hard work and perseverance. This results in a positive and ultimately more satisfying attitude to learning.

A **fixed mindset** limits our belief in ourselves. We believe we are born with a certain amount of intelligence and this cannot be changed. A fixed mindset means we are unlikely to take risks or face challenges in our learning, playing it safe, only attempting to tackle problems we already know how to solve. This results in a negative outlook to learning and a lack of confidence to even try.

Practitioners reflected on the praise they usually used, and how hard it was to change some familiar phrases! We did not want to stop encouraging children, but felt that we could increase our repertoire of comments, to recognise effort and challenge thinking more. Each room in the host setting put up a reminder poster ('41 ways to say well done' devised by

Nancy Stewart, Early Learning Consultancy, see below) and these were shared with the settings and childminders.

Supporting children's intrinsic motivation and growth mindset

- Participate sensitively in children's play, following the child's lead.
- Show interest in and encourage children to describe their efforts, ideas and products.
- Acknowledge children's work and ideas by making specific comments.
- Be careful with praise, always being specific about the behaviour – just as with negative behaviour, label the behaviour and not the child.

'Next time you're tempted to praise your students' intelligence or talent, restrain yourself. Instead, teach them how much fun a challenging task is, how interesting and informative errors are, and how great it is to struggle with something and make progress. Most of all, teach them that by taking on challenges, making mistakes, and putting forth effort, they are making themselves smarter.'

Carol Dweck, *Transforming Students' Motivation to Learn*

41 ways to say 'Well done'

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. You remembered! | 21. That's the way. |
| 2. You're working really hard. | 22. You've got the hang of that. |
| 3. One more time and you'll have it. | 23. You're looking really carefully. |
| 4. You chose a hard way – you'll learn from that! | 24. I think you've got it now. |
| 5. It looks like you've been practising! | 25. You're trying to do even more! |
| 6. (Child's name) looked really happy when you did that. | 26. You're learning a lot about that. |
| 7. I've never seen one like that before. | 27. That's an interesting idea. |
| 8. That was a kind thing to do. | 28. You've been concentrating on that. |
| 9. Look at you go! | 29. Good going! You kept trying. |
| 10. Keep it up. | 30. You've found a new way to do it. |
| 11. You've figured that out yourself. | 31. You've done it just like you said you would. |
| 12. I can see you ...(describe details of what child has done). | 32. What a lot of detail. |
| 13. Good remembering. | 33. Good thinking. That does make sense. |
| 14. I notice the way you... | 34. You haven't missed a thing. |
| 15. That is interesting. | 35. You tried harder and harder. |
| 16. You're on the right track now. | 36. You knew just what to do. |
| 17. Keep working on it, you're nearly there. | 37. I bet you're pleased with that. |
| 18. You are learning fast. | 38. You really paid attention. |
| 19. You tried a few different ways. | 39. You worked so carefully. |
| 20. Good for you! | 40. That's it! It works! |
| | 41. Which do you think is the best part? |

Reproduced with kind permission Nancy Stewart ©earlylearningconsultancy

Special books

In the hub setting practitioners took it in turns to spend a short amount of time each day one to one with some of their key children, looking together at their special books. These books contain photographs of the child's family, alongside examples of work, plus photographs and observations of learning. The children are encouraged to take care of their books, add to them and share them with their families.

As well as deepening the bond between key person and child, this special book time supports both child and adults' reflection and thinking. It's also a chance to add any new comments, ideas or observations shared by the child. This reflection often led to children thinking more deeply about their experiences, and in some cases, setting themselves further challenges.

Progress in action: Jason's towers

Jason has been absorbed for some time in the construction area, building symmetrical towers and a wall with unit blocks. He puts two toy dinosaurs at the base of the towers, pauses to look and then moves to the graphics area. He selects a piece of paper and begins to draw: "These are the dinosaurs" he says and points to the outlines on his paper. He chooses a handful of lolly-sticks and arranges these carefully across the paper, paying particular attention to how close they are to each other. Once satisfied, he sticks them down. The practitioner, who is supporting another group nearby, comments: "it looks like you've made your building on paper Jason." With a smile, he returns to the construction area and begins to rearrange the blocks. He moves the towers closer together, mirroring how he moved the lolly sticks closer on his paper. The practitioner suggests they put his design in his special book with some photographs – and takes several pictures of his construction to add.

This short observation tells us a lot about Jason: his interest in construction and design, his involvement and ability to stay focused for a long period of time. Jason represents the dinosaurs through drawing and his building through the collage of lolly sticks. Self-assured and confident, he has moved on from the shy, sometimes anxious child at the start of term. He makes clear choices and connections between the different art forms: design and construction, linked to drawing and collage. He generates his own ideas, sustains his interest and perseveres. The practitioner's suggestion to include photographs of his construction alongside his artwork will give Jason and his key person the opportunity to reflect and discuss his thinking and ideas further.



Design through construction and collage

In a similar way, you could imagine discussing an architect's drawings and designs, reflecting on the finished building and discussing ideas for new projects.

In addition to children's special books, individual *Learning Stories*, identifying a particular interest or ongoing fascination, are created throughout the year. These are then added to each child's special book.

Adult-guided learning

The consultant's role was to introduce a variety of inspiring arts-based experiences, and work collaboratively with practitioners to set up and facilitate these in the hub and early years forum settings. Adult-guided experiences ranged from working with clay to weaving story sticks and sharing and modelling ideas for small group times with songs, games and rhymes. An important aspect of the project was the opportunity during training sessions for practitioners to take part in new, inspiring experiences before introducing them to the children. Practical strategies and case study examples helped us to develop ideas about how best to support the children's creative thinking during adult-guided learning.

Planning for adult-guided learning also involved taking a fresh look at provision, and thinking about where, when and how to present new experiences to the children.

Mentoring and supporting practice

Mentoring involved a simple 3-step process illustrated below. Mentees decided what they wanted to work on, where possible, and with the consultant's support, developed areas of provision, or tried new strategies. The hub setting also planned *triad observations*. This involved teaming up as a group of 3 practitioners and taking it in turns to observe each other teach an adult-guided experience over several weeks. The emphasis was on sharing positive feedback and discussing how the experiences could be developed further. Once the settings had decided what they wanted to work on linked to creative thinking and learning, the consultant visited to support and model practice.



Fig 3 Mentoring Process

Documenting the process

In the hub setting, photographs of children's play and engagement in new experiences, with comments and examples of work formed regular displays. We also included links to the characteristics of effective learning and to areas of learning and development. Many of these observations were also documented individually in children's special books and learning stories.

Practitioners documented their project journey through displays and, in some cases, through a scrapbook approach. The scrapbooks contained photographs and observations of

children's involvement in the project, alongside children's, parents' and practitioner comments.

The childminders documented their creative learning journeys individually, and fed back observations linked to the characteristics of effective learning to their co-ordinator. These observations were shared through photographs of children's play in their home settings and provided excellent discussion points. Everyone was able to see children's progress in action and how new ideas were being developed.

Towards the end of the project, images and highlights from the many different experiences together with participants' comments were presented during the celebration events.

Sharing the project with families

Over the year, the hub setting shared children's experiences of the project with their parents in a number of ways. This took place informally during drop-off and picking-up times, and by drawing parents' and carers' attention to special books and photographic displays. Scheduled parent-teacher conversations also provided the opportunity to discuss children's creative thinking and progress, through practical examples of their play and learning.

The celebration events at the end of the project were a huge success and very well-attended. Children, parents and carers joined-in with many of the creative, adult-guided experiences from the year. The children confidently demonstrated their knowledge and understanding, often showing parents how to use and work with some of the materials on offer.

Simple leaflets with the activity ideas and easy ways to try things at home were printed and shared. A photographic display of the celebration day activities meant that parents and children could see and talk about all the wonderful things they'd enjoyed together.

Some of the settings invited parents to take part in activities throughout the two terms of the project, as well as encouraging their families to try some of the ideas at home. A very positive outcome was how the childminders confidence grew in talking to parents about the characteristics of effective learning. They also shared creative ideas from the project; one of these was the 'Mystery Box' (described on page 20), which they developed in different ways to support mathematical learning, including number and counting.

Creative experiences developed as part of the project

The activities below can be explored and changed in lots of different ways. Coming up with new ideas, making connections and deciding how to do things are key characteristics of creative learning. It's good to value mistakes and things that go wrong, as these can lead to exciting developments and new discoveries.

You'll find that some children dive straight into new experiences, but others prefer to watch for a while before joining-in and some may not want to join-in at all! Be sensitive to this and let children take the lead in their own time. Be willing to 'have a go' and model your own

creative thinking skills, for these are important strategies in helping children to develop theirs.

As with any practical activity, it will be much easier if you plan ahead and prepare materials in advance. Always have pencil and paper to hand to jot down children's comments (and for them to write their own), and, if possible, a digital camera or I-Pod to record the process.

The Explore and Wonder Box

The Explore and Wonder Box (EWB) was created for the childminder sessions. We wanted a resource that was flexible, that could be stored away quickly and easily, and would work with different ages in different ways. The idea behind the EWB was to support children's creative thinking as they explored and played with easy-to-find, flexible, natural materials.



An Explore and Wonder Box

What you need:

- A sturdy cardboard box and lid
- Collage materials, paper, glue, felt-tips and/or paint
- A selection of household and natural materials, for example: empty plastic water bottles of different sizes; large pebbles and fir-cones; old-fashioned dolly pegs; collage items such as sequins, tissue paper, kitchen foil etc; ribbons and pipe-cleaners; A4 paper and card, and small cardboard boxes (shoebox size) with lid.

What you do

- We used cardboard archive boxes to create our EWB's, but any strong box with a lid will do. The key point here is the materials in the box and how they are used!
- Decorate your box any way you like. The childminders decorated their boxes using coloured paper, collage, paints and felt-tip pens.
- Add the materials you've gathered. These materials should be **open-ended**, i.e. they are flexible and can be used and played with in many different ways.
- Explore the materials with your children. What do you notice? What are the children most interested in, and what do they want to do with them? What comments or questions do you hear?
- You might decide to combine some of the things you have collected with other natural materials, i.e. fir-cones and pebbles with sand or water.

Progress in action – Using materials from the explore and wonder box

One child, who initially spent very short amounts of time engaged in an activity, spent a sustained period of time painting, gluing and arranging materials to create a natural world with small props and mini-beasts, with his childminder's encouragement. As well as noticing an increased sense of well-being, this observation also helped his childminder to scaffold his learning over the following weeks. She continued to support his play by providing a selection of small-world and natural materials and by becoming a partner in his play.

The childminders reported that the short, ongoing training mornings were helpful and enjoyable. They gave everyone the chance to explore new experiences, time to ask questions and time to reflect between sessions.

After the first training session one childminder commented: *"You can only use it (the usual plastic toy) only one way really, and the children get bored. Whereas with paper, art and natural materials, all different things are possible! All the thinking comes out of all the different ideas."*

Hapa Zome

Hapa Zome is the Japanese art of using flower petals and leaves to print or add colour to fabric or paper. It sounds like this might be a complicated process, but in fact it could not be simpler!



Collecting petals and leaves



Prints created from petals and flowers heads

What you need:

- A few chunky stones or pebbles, enough for one each, in a size that children will find easy to hold in their hand.
- A selection of petals and leaves that are safe and edible, for example: nasturtiums, marigolds, pansy, lavender, mint, coriander, parsley, chrysanthemums, carnations, violas, dandelions (further info here: <http://www.mnn.com/food/healthy-eating/stories/42-flowers-you-can-eat>). Look out for marked-down bunches of chrysanthemums in florists or the supermarket once they are past their best.
- Small squares of plain, strong kitchen towel or light-coloured cotton fabric (a pillow case or an old bed-sheet is ideal).
- A firm surface, in or outdoors. The top of a small, circular log or mat on the floor works well.

What you do

- This is a very simple technique. Lay a small square of cloth or paper towel flat (approx 15cm square is fine) and place petals and leaves carefully on one side, then fold the other half over to cover.
- Next, bash hard with your stone until you begin to see colour seeping into the fabric. Carefully peel back your cloth, remove the crushed petals – the pigment from the leaves and petals will have impregnated the cloth, leaving an interesting design.
- You might take photographs of each step of the Hapa Zome process and create a display or book to demonstrate the sequence.
- You might also make a display of the artworks produced, with an explanation of the method, plus observations and/or comments where possible from the children's experience.

The Mystery Box

What you need:

- A small, strong cardboard box with lid – a shoe box is ideal.
- Sparkly/decorative paper, glue, scissors, collage and bold felt-tip pen

The mystery box is a game that can be used in lots of different ways. Like the Explore and Wonder Box, the box itself is unimportant - It's what's inside and how you use it that matters.



Creating mystery boxes

What you do

- Cover your box with sparkly paper, firmly glue down the edges and corners. You want it to be as bright and attractive as possible!
- Title your box 'Mystery Box'. You could also add the words to the song (see below) to help you remember them.
- Some practitioners chose to cover their box with sticky-back plastic to protect it further.

- Gather a small collection of objects and add these to the box. These might link to an ongoing interest, a rhyme or story.
- Once you've decided on your object/s, sit in a circle with a small group of children. Introduce them to the box – shake it gently, so that they can hear there is something inside. Sing the Mystery Box song (see below), and invite children one by one to feel gently inside the box. They might like to shut their eyes to add to the excitement.
- We found it worked well to sing the song for each child, as it slowed the game down, and meant everyone had plenty of time to practice the words to the song.
- Children could also choose an object to take out of the box – make sure you have enough for one each and time to all look at the objects and discuss them.
- If possible, jot down what the children say and any questions they have.

One practitioner put together a mystery box full of fir-cones of different sizes, and reported that the children loved the game of shutting their eyes and putting their hands in to feel. This encouraged lots of talk and new vocabulary. Each time they played the mystery box game, the practitioner noticed that the children were asking new questions, and had begun to predict more and were developing their curiosity. The practitioner noted that this was particularly helpful for those children with English as an additional language.

- We also created laminated number cards with both words and numerals, and used wooden clothes pegs for counting by placing them over the edges of the box.

The mystery box song

(Tune 'this old man')

Mystery box,
What's inside?
What's that thing you're
Trying to hide?

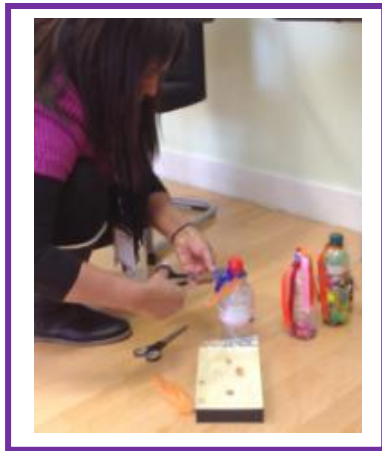
The mystery box – one childminder's experience

"I collected some natural objects following our discussion about sensory materials. In the park we found some fir-cones and large conkers. They made a really good noise when we shook the box which really excited the children! I encouraged them to shut their eyes and feel carefully to choose an object. We spent time exploring the shapes, patterns and counting. The children came up with lots of different ideas to play with the materials – it was much more open-ended than if we'd used a maths game".

Motivated to explore and investigate, this experience allowed for the children's own ideas and curiosity. Rather than a prescribed game with expected or limited outcomes, the children's own creativity was stimulated, and they enjoyed developing their ideas further.

Discovery bottles

There are all sorts of different things you can create using recycled plastic bottles – these are just two ideas:



Using found objects to create discovery bottles



Personalised discovery bottles

What you need:

- Empty plastic water bottles any size with lid
- A glue gun, strong glue or tape

Musical shakers

- A selection of small collage items, i.e. sequins, beads, shells, pebbles, dry pasta, glitter, kitchen foil, ribbons
- Optional – children's images

Seaside bottles

- Water and cheap baby oil
- Small amount of clean sand
- Small shells, plastic fish, glitter, sequins
- Blue food colour

What you do:

- **Musical shakers** - make sure the plastic bottles are dry inside before adding a selection of collage materials – kitchen foil can be rolled up tight into balls of different sizes and these make very good shaker objects. Involve the children in helping to make these with supervision.
- Glue the lids on tight using a glue-gun (*you can purchase 'low melt' glue sticks*) or another strong glue or tape. Tie some brightly coloured ribbons around the top.
- You might like to add a small photo of each child to their shaker and cover it with sticky-back plastic.
- These musical shakers are a wonderful resource to support movement, dance, songs and rhymes.
- **Seaside bottles** – add a small amount of sand to the bottom of each bottle, plus some shells, sequins, glitter or plastic fish. Fill $\frac{3}{4}$'s with water and add some drops of blue food colouring. Top the remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ with baby oil before gluing lids on firmly.

- These mini sea-worlds are beautiful to look at, particularly in front of a window. What do the children think? Listen out for their comments and questions as they explore these new resources.
- What stories could you read that link to the seaside bottles, for example, Rainbow Fish, Commotion in the Ocean or Smiley Shark?

One childminder said: *“they love the bottles... they really love to look. Some of the children thought it was special juice! Then I showed them it was something we could shake...”*

Transient Art

Transient art is art that is ‘moveable’ and non-permanent. It is a great way to make creative use of a wide variety of natural and found materials. It can be facilitated either indoors or out. It is sometimes called ‘no-glue art’.



Outdoor transient art area



Indoor transient art – childminder training session

What you need:

- A selection of natural and/or found objects, for example: fir-cones, conkers, leaves, pebbles, shells, sticks and seed pods or
- Large buttons, glass beads, fabric tassels, clothes pegs and wooden counters
- A table top or floor space and something that acts as a ‘canvas’ – a base for children’s compositions. For example: a builder’s tray, individual trays, picture frames, mirror tiles or place mats.

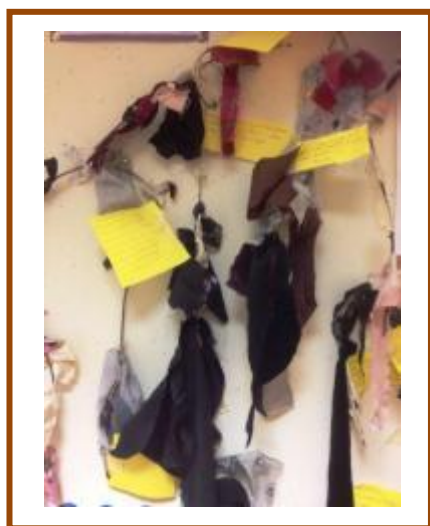
What you do:

- You can set up transient art outdoors or in – you may of course like to do both! If facilitating outdoors, a variety of natural materials will work best. For indoors, you might like to use a mixture of natural and found materials.
- Plan your transient art space in an area that is not too busy, i.e. where children are not likely to be disturbed by people walking through.
- Gather and organise materials with the children – a trip to the park or a DIY store can be good hunting ground for transient art materials.

- Natural baskets, trays or boxes make good containers to sort materials into
- Collect kitchen trays, old picture frames, or small squares of fabric etc so that each child has their own area to work within. Children may also enjoy collaborating.
- You might model exploring and placing materials yourself – or create something together with the children.
- Be sensitive to the children's ideas and suggestions and follow their lead.
- Take photographs of finished pieces to record children's work, and where possible include their comments and observations.
- Encourage the children to sort items back into their boxes or baskets once they have finished or at tidy-up time. Some children may like to leave their work and return – and some children may be inspired by others, both children's and adults work.

Story sticks

Story sticks are inspired by the Native American tradition of *talking sticks* and the rituals of oral story-telling. This idea was later transformed by some of the children into *dancing sticks*.



Story sticks – fabric, twigs and tape



Linked adult-guided using popular culture interests

What you need:

- A selection of sturdy sticks and twigs
- A variety of different fabric pieces, some cut or torn into thin strips
- Coloured wool or string
- Masking tape and scissors
- Paper and pencil to record children's stories or comments

What you do:

- If possible, gather the sticks and fabric pieces with the children.
- We put ours in a builder's tray on a rug on the floor, along with some strips of fabric, wool, tape and scissors.
- The adult modelled making up a simple story. Each bit of the story was represented by a different strip of fabric, and as the story was told, these were wrapped around

the stick. For example “Once upon a time there was princess (*pink gauze fabric*) who lived in a castle (*dark grey felt*). One day a dragon (*floaty green fabric*) came to visit, and they had strawberries (*red patterned fabric*) for tea.... The end” (this particular theme was chosen because of an ongoing interest in princesses, castles, knights and dragons).

- Take your time with this experience. Some children may want to explore the materials; others may be keen to make up more than one story. Some children may need the adult’s help to secure their strips of fabric. One child was fascinated to see the adult tear the strips of fabric (see *progress in action* example overleaf).
- Write down as many stories as possible (don’t forget to have paper and pencils to hand). Once the children begin to tell their stories, you will have to write fast to catch them all!
- Make a display of the story sticks together with their stories. The children were delighted to see themselves as authors. Title your display and add links to the characteristics of effective learning and/or areas of learning.
- Alongside this experience, one of the class teachers planned an adult-guided activity linked to children’s favourite popular culture characters. Using A4 sheets of paper and images with space to write and create illustrations, this deepened and extended the children’s experience of the story-telling.
- Finally, one child discovered that their story-stick could become a ‘dancing stick’ and spent time outside exploring movement. Their enthusiasm and creativity drew the other children in. This continued and music was provided outdoors so that the children could explore this further.

Here are some of the wonderful stories the children created

“Once upon a time there was some eggs and they were hatching into baby dragons and the mummy and daddy dragons were flying with their wings. They were going to eat their lunch.” (Alex)

“This is a story stick. Princess Ariel went to the castle and then the dragon came. Then she had some strawberries, then she pulled a bucket, then she went to bed. The bucket was full of water” (Miriam).

“Once upon a time there was a pond, a seesaw, a book. The end” (Mina)

“Once upon a time there was an elephant. She fell on the grass and hurt her knees... there was red blood. I made a door in my story stick....” (Izza)

“The dragon pushed. The End” (Milly)

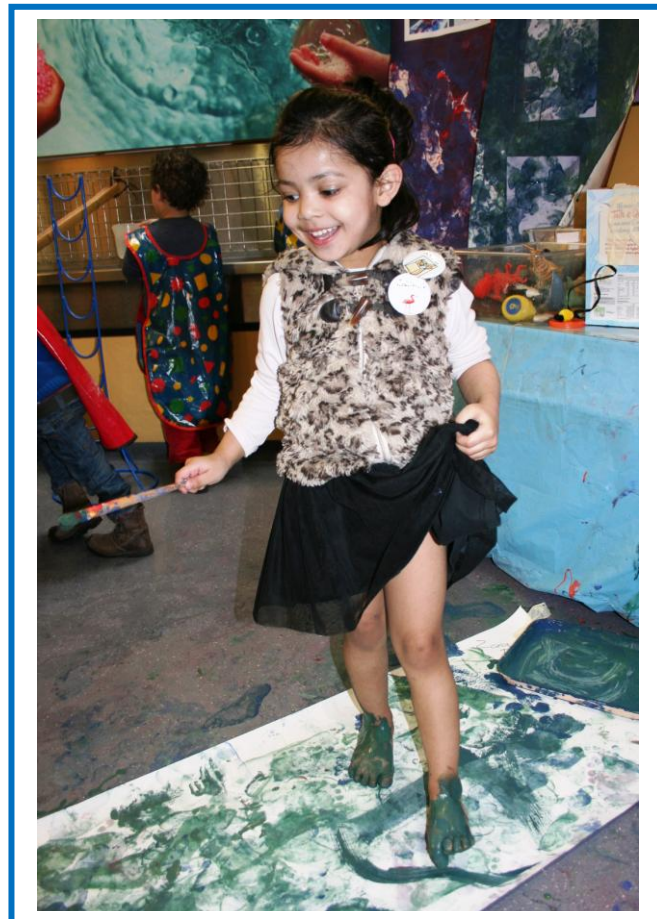
“Once upon a time there was a tiger and he lived in the jungle. He was very brave!” (Hafar)

Progress in action: Observation of Rehan

“Rehan, I saw that you were about to move away from the story-stick making, when you heard the sound of the fabric ripping. You stopped and watched very closely. I was tearing the fabric into thin strips for our story sticks. I showed you how I cut the edge of the fabric with my scissors and then pulled the two pieces apart. You had a big smile on your face as you watched me do this! I offered you one of the pieces of fabric to pull, but you took both - you wanted to try this on your own. It was hard for you to rip the fabric, so I suggested we cut it a little more. You found this easier, and you were really happy when you pulled the two pieces apart! You took the scissors and tried to cut the fabric yourself. This was also difficult because the scissors were not very sharp, and you looked at me for help. I showed you how to snip with the very end of the scissors, where they were sharpest. You practiced and continued doing this yourself, working out how far to cut the fabric so you could tear it. You spent nearly forty minutes completely engrossed in cutting and ripping the fabric. You seemed particularly satisfied with the ripping sound the fabric made as you tore it. Now you can snip and tear the fabric by yourself really well!”

Exploring paint

During the project, we explored lots of different ways to use paint, including: colour mixing, home-made finger paint, foot and hand printing and small and large scale spin painting. Many of these activities grew out of children’s fascination for mixing and combining media and materials.



Foot printing using lining paper and powder colour

Opportunities for colour mixing

Children were frequently involved in mixing small quantities of primary colour powder paints. These were then used on the easel. Brushes of different sizes and thickness were provided, along with simple materials for printing, such as small sponges, corks and combs to create pattern and texture. Small quantities of water and powder colour were also added to a builder's tray so children could experiment with colour mixing in a different form. This worked particularly well when we made a cooked paste to create our own finger paint. Another memorable day during a torrential rain storm, the children were invited to add powder paint to giant puddles outside. We stirred these up with brushes and sticks, and there was a lot of splashing up and down in glee!

Finger Paint

What you need:

- A large mug of corn-flour
- Cold water and food colours or powder paint
- Access to boiling water and/or stove
- Large bowl or saucepan & wooden spoon

What you do:

- In a plastic bowl or saucepan, mix the corn-flour in **as little** cold water as possible.
- Next, add hot tap water, to fill your saucepan $\frac{3}{4}$ s full, and bring to the boil on a stove stirring all the time, **or** add hot water from a wall-mounted water heater. For the 2nd option, the water must be **very hot** (and there must be enough corn-flour) in order to make the mix thicken. Add the hot water slowly and stir constantly.
- Once the mixture has thickened, allow to cool. You can use this mixture without colour, but to make your own finger paints, divide into jars or smaller bowls and add food colours or a spoonful of powder colour and mix well.
- We placed large spoonfuls of the **cooled** mix in a builder's tray with small amounts of powder colour dotted about, so the children could experiment with the material and mix colours in any way they chose.
- Many of the children enjoyed the sensory experience of sliding their hands through this soft, silky smooth material. Children also explored combining colours together and drawing. One child drew herself and then wrote her name on top.
- You might try taking a mono-print from the patterns or images created in this mix: Lay a piece of paper over the image, smooth gently with your hand and peel back carefully from one corner.
- The easy transformation of the finger paint mixture and, for example, that a flat surface can quickly be wiped clean, really attracts some children to this experience.

Hand and foot printing

What you need:

- Powder paint, water and small flat trays and brushes
- Large sheets of sugar paper or a roll of lining paper
- Masking tape
- Washing up bowls and old towels



What you do:

- Choose a good spot for this - children will benefit from being able to hold onto a solid piece of furniture or a wall, as the paint can be slippery underfoot. It needs to be away from the regular flow of traffic and any equipment you don't want to get paint on. Outdoors can work well.
- Prepare several bowls of warm water next to two chairs with old towels so once children have finished painting, they can sit down and wash their hands and feet easily.
- Have paper and pencil within easy reach, so you can jot down children's comments and questions. Ideally, also have a camera at the ready.
- With the children's help, tape out a length of lining paper/large sheets of paper (*make sure you use sugar paper, paper with a shiny surface will be dangerously slippery. Rolls of sturdy lining paper are available in the decorator's section in DIY stores.*)
- Involve the children in mixing medium-thick paint colour for the trays, 2-3 colours will be plenty.
- Finally, ask the children to take off their shoes and socks (remove yours too!), and put these together in a designated spot, not too far from the washing station.
- Model for the children how to dip your foot carefully into the paint and wiggle it around a little, then press your foot onto the paper.
- Some children will really benefit from the 'adult permission' to do this and appreciate your encouragement.
- Children may want to keep their footprints clearly-defined, but many loved mixing the paint with their feet and spreading it around the paper. Some children spent the whole morning engrossed in this experience, with many more keen to join in.
- Once the paper was full, we hung it up on the walls nearby to dry, and this became the backdrop for a display of photographs of the experience with children's comments.
- You may need to limit numbers at first, so the area does not become overcrowded.

Progress in action: trying something new

One child was fascinated by the foot-painting, and was encouraged to come and look by his key person. He was very unsure, but his key person crouched down next to him whilst he watched the other children explore the paint. In a calm and reassuring way, she modelled exploring the paint herself, and after a little while, he placed one finger in the paint. There was no rush or attempt to hurry this process. A little while later, he put his whole hand in the paint. Later the same morning he revisited this activity, and asked to put both feet in the paint.



Exploring hand and foot printing

Spin painting

We did this in two different ways - small and large-scale.

What you need:

- Small paper plates or circles of paper or light card
- Salad spinners – the sort used to dry lettuce or greens in (IKEA or kitchen stores)
- Plastic table cloth or old newspapers
- Runny, ready mixed paint - powder paint can be made into ready-mixed simply by adding water and shaking well – we found old plastic hair dye bottles worked really well, as they limited the flow of paint.

What you do:

- Cover the floor or table top with old newspapers or a plastic table cloth
- Put a paper plate in the bottom of the salad spinner and squirt small quantities of paint – use several different colours for best effect – into the middle of the plate.
- Put the salad spinner lid on and spin!
- The paint should combine to make some wonderful patterns. If you feel it needs more, just add a little extra paint and spin again. The excess paint in the bottom of the spinner will need to be emptied from time to time.
- The physical action of spinning and the unusual paint effects make this an exciting and enjoyable activity for everyone!
- Because the paint is contained in the salad spinner, this can be a particularly attractive activity for those worried about mess to try at home.



Spin painting small-scale using salad spinners

Large-scale spin painting

We created small and large scale artworks using a small potter's turning wheel. We balanced a circular table top on top for the large pieces - beautiful, collaborative artworks were the result.

What you need:

- Sturdy potter's turning wheel (find in the art section of educational catalogues or try CTM Supplies www.ctmpotterssupplies.co.uk)
- A circular piece of ply-board, old table top or a builder's tray
- Large sheets cartridge/sugar paper

- Masking tape
- Small bottles of ready-mixed paint – we used red, blue, green and yellow

What you do:

- Choose an area with plenty of space – outdoors is ideal, because the paint may splatter
- Centre the builder's tray or board carefully on the wheel, with room for children to fit round the outside
- With the children's help, trim and tape sugar paper to create a circle to cover the board.
- Spin the wheel gently and invite the children to drip small amounts of paint. It works best to direct this into the middle, for as the wheel spins, the force will drive the paint outwards.
- Once the paint had spread, try experimenting by putting your finger-tips gently into the paint near the edges, whilst the tray or board is spinning.
- Dry your artworks in the sun or wind - you might need to add large stones/bricks to the edges to hold the paper down.
- We used the artworks to create a large display with annotated photographs of the experience in action.
- Many of the children enjoyed the physical aspect of squeezing paint from the bottles, and we had to limit quantities. An excellent follow-up (or prior) activity would have been to provide washing-up bottles filled with water, so children could squirt away at plants or on the tarmac outdoors.



Large scale spin-painting using a potter's wheel and table top

An **un-expected gain** from this experience was the development of a creative movement game. This extended the dancing the children had enjoyed throughout the term. Close-up photographs were taken of each artwork. Printed A5 size, these images were laminated with a different movement word added to the back of each. We chose words based on our observations of the children's movements, and also introduced some new words. For example: spin, jump, hop, wriggle, tip-toe, glide etc. The cards were spread out on the floor

and children were invited to choose an image they liked and then dance in response to the word on the back. This game proved very popular. For one very able child, this was a fantastic opportunity for her to share her knowledge of reading, and she delighted in taking a lead in the game.



Creative



Movement



Game

Peek-a-boo books

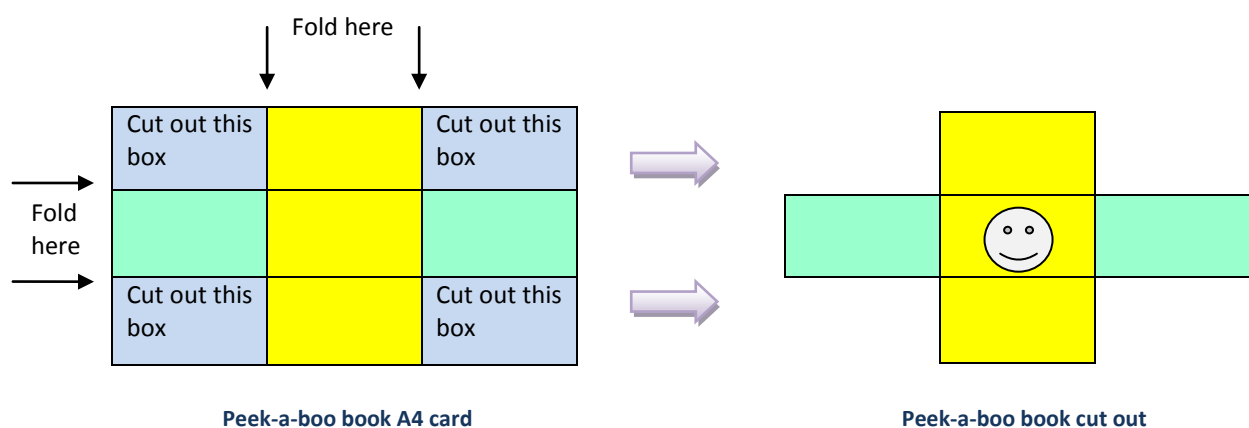
Peek-a-boo books are a very simple small book made from one piece of A4 paper or card. Of course, you can make bigger books, but this is a good place start. The children really enjoyed having their own, personal little books, and were pleased to be able to take them home to share with families.

What you need:

- A4 card, any colour
- Scissors
- Collage or photos
- Felt-tip pens/crayons

What you do:

Make two folds in your A4 card across the width and length – see diagram below:



Peek-a-boo book A4 card

Peek-a-boo book cut out

- This will leave you with 9 'boxes' divided by the folds in the card
- Cut the 4 corners out along the folds (shaded above)
- This will leave you with a shape like this, on the right
- This is your book – fold the 4 flaps over, one on top of the other – this is the 'cover'

- Put a child's photo in the middle and invite them to draw or write on their book. Perhaps they would like to write their name on one of the flaps?
- You could turn your peek-a-boo book into a 'who or what am I?' book. For example, put a picture of a person, animal or object in the centre, with clues on each flap.
- Store the peek-a-boo books in a basket near your book area, so children can look at these when they like.
- Consider running a parent workshop so families can make their own peek-a-boo books together.

"Making the peek-a-boo book really tempted one child in. He saw the other children making their books and became interested, joining us to explore materials (something he usually found difficult to do). I invited him to choose his own images (from catalogues) to stick inside his book, which he really enjoyed. He spent a long time carefully cutting, choosing and planning his book."

Working with clay

Exploring clay (or dough) gives children the opportunity to find out about the world through all of their senses. Clay, in particular, is strong and hard-work! It exercises the muscles in the hands, arms, shoulders and back, and can be a helpful outlet for expressing emotions. Clay is an open-ended material - there are lots of different ways to use and play with it. Some children may be intimidated by a large piece of slippery clay, so try offering a small, less sticky ball of clay instead. Store clay wrapped in polythene at room temperature, in a sealed bin. If it becomes hard or dries out, spray a little water on the surface, and leave to soak in.



Working with clay

What you need:

- White stoneware clay (terracotta is lovely to use but will stain clothing easily) or an equivalent self-hardening clay (both available from art pages of educational suppliers)
- A selection of collage and found materials, for example: match sticks, corks, twigs, buttons, beads, wire and old lace (this can be pressed into the clay once it's rolled flat) to explore pattern and printing.
- Small wooden boards or old pieces of tea-towel to work on
- Aprons or old tea shirts to protect clothing

- Rolling pins or a broom handle cut into sections with ends smoothed with sandpaper
- A square of damp towel or a water spray to cover the clay to keep it soft
- E45 hand cream or equivalent – this helps to form a barrier between skin and clay, making it easier to wash off and protect those who have sensitive skin or eczema.

What you do:

- Provide each child with a small wooden board or piece of tea-towel, and twist off pieces of clay for everyone. Place a tray of materials in the middle of a table for the children to explore.
- Children will enjoy exploring the clay, and the following skills are good to teach:
 1. **how to roll a small piece of clay into a ball between both hands**
 2. **how to press a small piece of clay really thin and flat between your fingers**
 3. **how to roll a ball of clay out using a rolling pin, and**
 4. **how to squeeze and roll a snake between both hands without breaking it!**
- Children will enjoy using these new skills to explore the clay further, and appreciate adult modelling and encouragement alongside.
- One child was fascinated to see what happened when they pressed the lace fabric into the clay. Another child created a whole family of snakes, delighting in their developing skill to roll very long snakes without breaking the clay!
- The clay can be recycled by spraying lightly with water and replacing in its plastic bag or allowed to air dry. Once dry, it can be painted and varnished. Acrylic paints work well, as they will colour *and* seal the clay. You could also use ordinary paint with a good dollop of PVA glue mixed in.

Progress in action – dinosaur fossils

During the celebration day, a visiting child became deeply involved in exploring patterns and textures in the clay. At first, he experimented with clay tools, but then tried out his ideas using some of the small world dinosaurs. He discovered that by rolling the clay flat and pressing it down with his hand, he could create a smooth surface in which to make a very clear footprint. He exclaimed excitedly ‘Look at my dinosaur fossil!’



Discovering dinosaur fossils

Developing ideas for small group times

Many of the early years forum settings were also interested in developing and refreshing their small group times. Along with the arts experiences and creative story-making, we introduced a variety of creative movement and rhyme games. Some are outlined below.

The spider web game *(Rhythm and rhyme)*

What you need:

- A large soft, ball of fluffy wool or string, any colour
- A toy spider or puppet, and a few other soft toys hidden in a paper gift bag (or make a spider out of pipe cleaners)

What you do:

- Sit with the children in a circle and tell them you are going to create a magic spider's web in the middle, and you need everyone's help to do it!
- Tie a small loop in the end of the wool, and ask one child to hold onto this.
- Then pass the ball of wool back and forth across the circle, with each child holding a piece (they could do this on their own or in twos and threes), to create a 'web' in the middle. You could sing a hello song whilst you do this and include everyone's name.
- Finish by holding the remaining wool yourself and invite the children to wriggle the spider's web, lift it up and down, look at the shapes you have made, and then hold it still for the first visitor!
- Take the toy spider out from the bag, place it on the web, and make it wriggle along to the following rhyme:

A spider came to visit you....

(Tune 'The ants go marching two by two')

A spider came to visit you,
she wriggled, she wriggled!
A spider came to visit you,
she wriggled, she wriggled!

A spider came to visit you...
she had eight legs (*count these with the children*)
And a furry body too....
she wriggled, wriggled,
wriggled, wriggled...
Did she frighten you?

We changed the rhyme by replacing the spider with different toys and words:

Other verses:

An elephant came to visit you....

An elephant came to visit you
He stomped, he stomped!
An elephant came to visit you
He stomped, he stomped!
An elephant came to visit you
He had a long trunk and big eyes too!
He stomped, stomped, stomped,
stomped!
Did he frighten you?

A rabbit came to visit you...

A rabbit came to visit you
She hopped, she hopped!
A rabbit came to visit you
She hopped, she hopped!
A rabbit came to visit you
She had long ears and a fluffy tail
too,
She hopped, hopped, hopped,
hopped!
Did she frighten you?

- To end the game, ask the children to say goodbye to all the animals. They might like to guess how long it will take to wind up the spider's web? You could introduce them to units of time, i.e. *seconds* and possibly *minutes*. Start winding up the ball of wool, going back the opposite way across the circle, **slowly counting out-loud with the children as you do so**. The children will enjoy counting together for such a clear purpose.
- Once you've rewound the wool, either pass the ball around the circle for each child to hold for a moment, or invite the children to put their thumbs into the middle, count 1, 2, 3 and whoosh them up into the air! Everyone claps to say thank-you for joining in. This helps to finish the game on a clear note.
- To follow-up, you might provide small balls of wool or string for children to create their own spider-webs, and also create some homemade spiders with pipe cleaners?
- Information books about spiders and other animals that you introduced would also be helpful, as well as repeating the game, with the same and different animals.

Progress in action – a new rhyme inspires creative learning

One child who rarely spoke in nursery was incredibly excited about the spider (he loved Spiderman) and began to chant the spider's name for the rest of group time.

Another child made the connection to her favourite song, Incy Wincy Spider. With the adult's encouragement, she invented her own rhyme by combining different parts of the two songs together.

A few days later, one of the children who had taken part in the spider web game made a book. She said to the adult "I'll write my name, and then you do the noting. The rabbit came to visit you! He was hopped! And then he did a story for all the children."

She was able to recall key points from the rhyme and invent her own version. She illustrated her book and very proudly took it home. When her mother and older sister picked her up that day, they were delighted with her achievements.

Old McTavish has a box *(Listening and remembering sounds)*

This idea has been adapted from the game Mrs Browning has a box in Letters and Sounds phase 1 p10 2007.

What you need:

- A cardboard box
- A puppet or small world toy and a few familiar and noisy items, i.e. a sheep or dog, bunch of keys, an empty crisp packet, a small bell, squeaky toy etc

What you do:

- Turn the box on its side and one by one, put each item inside, giving the children time to see each object.
- As you do this, name each one, and demonstrate its sound clearly for everyone to see and hear. For the small world toys, you will need to make the sound yourself!

Old McTavish has a box

"Old McTavish has a box, ee-i-ee-i-o!

And in that box she has a"

STOP here, gesture to the children to LISTEN.

Handle one of the objects in the box to make a sound, or make the sound yourself if it's one of the toys or small world objects.

The children take it in turns to guess what's making the sound.

Continue the song, but imitate the sound using your voice:

"With a ding-ding here, a ding-ding there! Here a ding, there a ding, everywhere a ding-ding!

Old McTavish has a box, ee-i-ee-i-o!"

- Sing to the tune of 'Old MacDonald' but use your own name or one of the children's.
- Once the children are familiar with the game, they can take it in turns to make a noise for one of the objects in the box.
- You can follow up this game by trying different things. For example, set up a model farm, and describe one of the animals, but don't tell the children its name. Say for example, "It has a woolly coat, 4 legs and likes to eat grass".
- Ask them to say which animal it is, and invite them to make the noise the animal makes.
- As children develop their confidence, they can take the lead and describe the animals for others.
- Make the game more challenging by having different sets of objects, i.e. sea creatures, musical instruments or types of wrapping, i.e. kitchen foil, paper bag, plastic bag or a crisp packet. Or have a set of random objects.

Button you must wander (working as a team, listening and watching, new vocabulary)
This traditional rhyme works well in both small and large groups.

You will need:

- Length of string or wool (long enough to reach around the group of children)
- Button with large holes to thread onto the wool or string

What you do:

- Ask the children to sit or stand in a circle
- With the children's help, measure the wool so that it reaches around the circle, with everyone holding it.
- Once you've done this, show them the button, and thread this onto one end of the wool. Wrap the wool twice around the button holes, so the button cannot move too easily. Knot the two ends of wool together.
- Sing the song below, and tell the children that when the song stops, whoever is closest to the button must hide it in their hand, and try not to let anyone see them doing this! They must also try not to laugh!
- The rest of the group have to guess who is hiding the button.

Button you must wander

(Tune Peter hammers)

Button you must wander, wander,
wander
Button you must wander everywhere.
Sharp eyes will find you
Bright eyes will find you
Button you must wander everywhere!

- You can change direction, and sing the song slowly or more quickly, so that different children have a turn.
- Once the children are confident with the rhyme, introduce more buttons! Try and find interesting ones - different colours, shapes and a different number of holes in the middle.
- Start a collection of buttons for a button tin – buttons come in all sorts of shapes and sizes, and are a marvellous resource for creating transient art on trays or within picture frames or small mirror squares, as well as providing lots of opportunities to explore maths and number.

"During one of our small group sessions, one child discovered that he could hold onto the button whilst the wool continued around the circle. He 'hid' the button three times before we realised what was going on! I thought this showed some really quick thinking on his part. We decided to wrap the thread around the button holes twice so it wouldn't move, so that all the children had the chance to have a go at hiding it. We were all solving problems together!"

Progress in the here and now - case studies from the project

The following case studies illustrate children's creative and critical thinking during child-initiated play over the course of the project. The first example describes the building of a wall. This was quite risky play, but with the adult's help, the children were able to persevere safely and expand their thinking to reach their goal. (This case study also appeared in the Nursery World Article - EYFS Best Practice - All about...: 'gifted and talented' 07 March 2016 by Caroline Vollans)

Building a wall

During the morning two boys had begun to build a wall in the outdoor area with large hollow blocks. Their excitement and enthusiasm was evident. U appeared very confident and had a clear goal in mind. As I approached, the boys looked at me slightly anxiously, perhaps guessing my thoughts. They had built the wall across the path and I was concerned about their safety and others.

"We're building a really high wall!" U said - "it's got to be higher!"
 "It's an amazing looking wall" I replied "... and I am a bit worried that it's across the path.... Can you think of a way to make it safer for you and J to carry on?" U looked around and then ran to fetch one of the small street signs which he placed in front of the wall. I suggested we move it back a little, to give the other children plenty of time to stop if they were running or riding a bike. The boys' next challenge was how to safely reach high enough to continue building. Nervously, J placed a small block inside the trolley they were using. He tested this out by stepping onto it, and then looked at me for help - I suggested that perhaps U could help by holding the trolley steady. J very carefully placed the next block on the wall. With U's guidance, he moved it a tiny amount, so that it was exactly in line with the blocks below.

As they continued to help each other achieve their goal, the boys relaxed and settled into an enjoyable rhythm of taking it in turns to stand and carefully lift blocks onto the next level. They seemed to have realised it made sense to slow down and make sure each block was carefully placed, in order to strengthen the wall. They were able to test out their ideas, try out different ways of doing things and solve problems as they arose. Their shared persistence, ideas and effort was an important moment in their friendship. Ultimately, they were hugely satisfied with reaching their goal.



"We're building a really high wall!"

A note on safety and *risk benefit* assessment

The example above recognises the *risk benefit assessment* approach to risk management. The practitioner, who was able to remain and supervise the play, helped the children to slow down and think about their safety and others, i.e. what were the benefits of taking reasonable risks? U and J were given the opportunity to learn about how to assess and cope with the risks of building the wall, and encouraged to think about how to build the wall safely.

Had the practitioner not been able to remain close by at the time, the children would have been asked to build their wall in a safer space, i.e. away from the path and other children's play. Further information about risk benefit assessment can be found here:

<https://rethinkingchildhood.com/2014/11/12/rba-risk-benefit-assessment-form-launch/>

At the start of the term, the block and role play areas had been switched over to make both spaces work better. Simply resourced, the block play area has large and small blocks, builder's helmets, an old steering wheel, trolleys, a small ladder and car tyres, clip boards and pencils. These materials provided ample opportunities for creative play and learning.

'When the environment is right, there is a contagious sparkle in the air, the children are deeply engaged in their learning and practitioners' confidence soars as they are free to support each child constructively on their learning journey.' (Mark Making Matters 2008).



Physical development - using puppets to support new experiences

In the hub setting, practitioners were planning different ways to support children's physical development. Several children lacked confidence in spending time outdoors and were nervous about using the climbing equipment. Two low-level 'A' frames had been set up like a bridge with a ladder across the middle. A practitioner approached J to invite him outside.

"J, you were in the block area playing with a wooden aeroplane. I thought you might like to come and have a go on the climbing bridge, so I showed you the small, blue parrot. Blue parrot had hurt his wing, and needed help to fly outside. I asked if you could help parrot using your wooden aeroplane. You were a little shy at first, but then you helped to put him in the seat of your plane. Your friend A arrived and asked if he could help too.

Looking pleased, you and A flew the aeroplane outside. Blue parrot wanted to have a go on the bridge. I asked if you could show him how. You hesitated at first, but once A had climbed up, you decided to have a go. You climbed slowly but steadily to the top. You patted the top bar to show blue parrot where he could sit. You sat for a while, watching other children cross the bridge. When it was clear, you carefully moved down to sit on the first rung. You weren't quite sure how to get across, but you began to experiment.

After trying a few different ways, you decided to slide your feet out in front of you, and followed with the rest of your body, using your hands to support your weight. This was a really creative way of getting across the bridge! When you got to the other end, you were

smiling and really happy. Your confidence had grown! You pulled yourself up, over and down the other side. You were so pleased that you decided to have another go straightaway!

The next time, you climbed more quickly, and tried a slightly different way of crossing the bridge. Altogether, you climbed the bridge five times! You showed one of the other children how to climb up the first section, and you also solved the problem of how to get your leg over the top of the A frame more quickly. I'm so proud of you, and really pleased you came outside to have a go. Blue parrot was very happy that you helped!"

The puppet prop enabled the practitioner to make a connection between J's interest in planes and the possibility of trying something new outdoors. The simple narrative of blue parrot needing help, helped to scaffold J's learning and development.



A puppet invites a new experience

Connor's delivery service

Connor loves spending time outdoors often playing with his friend Levi. On this particular morning, he had developed a game which involved putting objects - wooden hollow blocks - into cardboard boxes and delivering them to various adults in the garden. (I wondered if this idea had come from Connor's interest in comics.... He often reads one on his journey to school and enjoys the Postman Pat stories).

Connor's key person noticed his involvement and came to chat with him about what he was doing. He told her "It's called Connor's delivery service". She asked "... and how do you know which people or houses to deliver to?" and they talked about house numbers and addresses. His key person suggested she bring him some labels and things to write with, so that if he wanted to he could write down people's addresses.

Connor's levels of involvement and persistence remained high all morning. Even when his trolley or writing materials were taken by other children, he went off to find them or asked for an adult's help. His enthusiasm drew other children to the play, and with adult support, they negotiated turns with the trolley until another was found. One child went off to get a dolls buggy to use instead.

Connor's enjoyment of this self-initiated activity was clear every time a parcel was gratefully received. Later, he found a quiet spot and sat down to add more labels to one of his parcels. He tucked a pencil behind his ear and said "I'm a proper worker".

Connor is playing with what he knows. He represents his experiences through role-play. Full of ideas, he solves all sorts of problems, from negotiating use of the trolleys, to who will help, to finding the right size blocks for his boxes. With his key person's encouragement, he adds address labels and delivery codes. Deeply involved, he bounces back when things don't quite go according to plan and shows great satisfaction in his success.



Creative role play



Writing for a purpose

Making a bus

Asa goes to the resources trolley in the modelling area. She explores the materials before selecting a shoe box, a large sheet of paper and some clear wrapping. She places these on the table next to another child who is making a model, with a practitioner's help. Purposeful and confident, she heads back to the trolley and gathers a felt-tip and coloured tape.

Adult: "you seem inspired by your papers Asa. Do you know what you're planning to do?" Asa says: "A bus", and then quietly, with great concentration gets on with making it. The practitioner follows her lead, sitting quietly observing, but not asking any more questions. First, Asa wraps the box with the paper, gluing the edges and folding them over. This doesn't work, and the paper won't stick. She then tries gluing more of the paper and rubs it hard to help it stick to the box. She carefully cuts small lengths of tape and sticks these down on top of the paper. She says to the adult, "I made it with tape" and begins to point out the different features. She points to the lid "It's so they can sleep" and says a little later "it has a cover so you can hide things and cover them".



Deep involvement – choosing the right materials, trying things out

A's friend U arrives. He also wants to make a model, and quickly chooses the materials he wants.

U says "I stuck them!"

A says "I stuck them too!"

A makes a label out of a small square of paper and writes her name, adding it to her bus.

She says "these are the wheels" showing them to her friend.

"I've got a good idea" he says.....

"You're full of ideas today!" says the adult.

"Yes! It's because she's (*meaning A*) my friend... we go outside"

"Yes! We're two neighbours!" says A

"Yes, we live near each other... these are two neighbourhoods!" U delights in his joke and the pleasure of this long word!

"I am going to do this..." A finds a yellow felt pen and begins to draw on the lid of her box

"My baby sometimes loves baths... and my baby sometimes doesn't" says A

U's teacher arrives and asks him if he might like to come and help with a picture and some writing they are doing next door, about the farm that came to visit.

A asks if she can come too

"Cos, she's my best friend forever!" says U.



Creative companionship: "Cos, she's my best friend forever!"

The enabling environment

This workshop space works well. There is:

- easy access to interesting, open-ended materials
- room for several children to work alongside each other and collaborate
- a supportive adult - the adult is calm and relaxed and does not interrupt the flow of conversation or creativity. She helps when asked.

Asa comes up with creative solutions to some of the difficulties she experiences. Fully involved and confident, she has lots of ideas. First she sees the 'bigger picture' of the

structure of her bus and later refines this with small design details. She describes her process at different points, pointing out particular features to the adult. She stays focussed on her goal and maintains concentration, even when her friend 'U' arrives. Asa and U are relaxed together and enjoy each other's company. They make connections about being together in the setting, in the same way that they are neighbours outside.



Documenting progress in action

Following the project, Helen Currie, assistant head teacher in the host setting, developed an aid memoir, in the form of a 'key fob', to support wording around the characteristics. This practical resource has been very helpful in supporting staff to reflect and describe children's progress in action. It is reproduced below:

Playing and exploring - engagement	Words for exploring
Finding out and exploring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing curiosity about objects, events and people • Using senses to explore the world around them • Engaging in open-ended activity • Showing particular interests 	Curious, explored, investigated, engaged, interested in, excited by, discovered, took a risk, trial and error, effort, challenge, practiced, had a go, pretended, represented, took on a role, initiated, combined, were interested in, built, concentrated, persisted
Playing with what they know <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pretending objects are things from their experience • Representing their experiences in play • Taking on a role in their play • Acting out experiences with other people 	
Being willing to 'have a go' <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiating activities • Seeking challenge • Showing a 'can do' attitude • Taking a risk, engaging in new experiences, and learning by trial and error 	

Documenting progress in action continued...

Active learning - motivation	Words for motivation
Being involved and concentrating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining focus on their activity for a period of time • Showing high levels of energy, fascination • Not easily distracted • Paying attention to details 	Focused, (period of time)___minutes, fascinated, energy, paid attention/not distracted, persisted, challenge, changed, recovered, satisfied, achieved, proud, accomplished, stimulated, made goals, made plans, effort, learnt, motivated, deeply involved, curious, maintained focus
Keeping on trying <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persisting with activity when challenges occur • Showing a belief that more effort or a different approach will pay off • Bouncing back after difficulties 	
Enjoying achieving what they set out to do <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing satisfaction in meeting their own goals • Being proud of how they accomplished something - not just the end result • Enjoying meeting challenges for their own sake rather than external rewards or praise 	

Creating and critical thinking- thinking	Words for thinking
Having their own ideas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinking of ideas • Finding ways to solve problems • Finding new ways to do things 	Thought, wondered, maybe, knew, remembered, forgot, idea, made sense, planned, learnt, found out, confused, figured out what you were trying to do, puzzled, what else was possible, talked aloud, described, interested, created, met a challenge, problem-resolution, solved problems, patterns, links, new ways to do things, predicted, tested, developed, sequenced, cause and effect, decision, reached a goal, strategy, changed, reviewed, were flexible
Making links <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making links and noticing patterns in their experience • Making predictions • Testing their ideas • Developing ideas of grouping, sequences, cause and effect 	
Choosing ways to do things <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning, making decisions about how to approach a task, solve a problem and reach a goal • Checking how well their activities are going • Changing strategy as needed • Reviewing how well the approach worked 	

Example: Key Fob – Progress in Action

Showing progress - *emerging*

The first time you tried... At first... You started... In the beginning... When you first... Initially... You began... Unsure... Tried... Tested... Nervously... Suddenly... Short periods... Frustrated... Novice... Concentrated hard...

Showing progress - *working within*

The next time... Again... You carried on... Next you... When you revisited... You continued... Tried again... Once more... Happy to... Repeated... Happy... Confidently... Better than before... Longer period... Concentrated

Showing progress - *secure*

Finally... Always... Continued... Revisited... Happy to... Expertly... Developed... Showed others how to... Supported others... Now you can... Moved onto... A long time... Happy to... Relaxed... Mastered ... Could do this whilst doing something else...

Devised by Helen Currie, Sheringham Nursery School, Newham



References

Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V. S. Ramachaudran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior* (Vol. 4, pp. 71-81). New York: Academic Press.

Dweck, C. S. "[Even Geniuses Work Hard.](#)" *Educational Leadership* 68.1 (2010): 16-20

[Mark Making Matters](#) Young children making meaning in all areas of learning and development DCSF 2008

[Letters and Sounds: Principles and Practice of High Quality Phonics](#) Primary National Strategy 2007

[Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook \(August 2015\)](#)

Schweinhart, L. J. et al 2005 Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40 (pp. 194–215), High/Scope Press by High/Scope® Educational Research Foundation http://www.highscope.org/file/Research/PerryProject/specialsummary_rev2011_02_2.pdf

Sylva, K. and Melhuish, E. and Sammons, P. and Siraj-Blatchford, Iram and Taggart, Brenda (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report: A Longitudinal Study* Funded by the DfES 1997-2004.

The impact of the project in the words of the participants

Difference for the children

The ideas continue to enhance children's creativity and their thinking skills.

The project has allowed children to 'think outside the box' – finding more than one way of using an object – it has covered all areas of development.

Transient art was a big favourite. The children were convinced at first it needed to be stuck down to the paper – it changed their way of thinking!"

The children have been able to explore all areas of learning... it has allowed them to express themselves.

The children have really enjoyed the mud kitchen in the garden!

It's taught the children there is no right or wrong way... we all have different ideas and thoughts. There's no time limit... activities can be continued and expanded.

It has helped the children with their physical skills, as well as having their own ideas, and choosing ways to do things.

When I set up the fairy garden the children loved it!

Creative learning has helped the children express themselves more. They are learning in a fun and exploratory way!

Children have been able to explore natural resources, and be involved in lots of different creative projects.

The children had the idea to get ladders to reach the top of their painting outside! They were inspired by the artist provocations.

A favourite experience was the paint spinning.... Watching the children's expressions and listening to them describing what they saw.

Children talk about their ideas and make connections between experiences.

Children's confidence has grown. They come up with ideas, and test them out.

Difference for the practitioners

I was able to think more creatively, and it gave me ideas of how else to interact with the children.

I am learning how to play with the children...giving time for new ideas and making new things.

The team have gained great ideas on how to do creative activities, and also what we need to do to improve our setting's environment.

We have lots more ideas for our group times... the story structure has been really helpful.

It has made me think more about using household objects.

It has made me more confident in planning a variety of creative activities – I now collect natural and different textured objects and then allow the children to experiment and explore.

It has made us all think about being creative.

Creativity can happen at any time... it's not just about art, painting or sticking. It's taken our learning to a different level.

I've reduced the amount of resources inside, for example, less 'stuff' in the construction area, but more good quality resources.

Less money! More thinking and making! Before, I used to chuck all the boxes away, but now I keep them. I can spend 2-3 hours playing, exploring and creating!

It's given me the confidence to try new ideas.

I think we really got to grips about understanding the characteristics and why they're important. We've developed the confidence to talk to parents more about their children's learning.

I found the project brilliant! I have continued to use the 'explore and wonder box'. Every child learns in different ways and has different ideas from the same activity.

I've become more aware of the way we use everyday maths, listening to cues given by children around mathematical language.

I really enjoyed the story sticks and found that these gave the children the opportunity to really extend their imagination. I was really impressed by some of their stories!

Really well thought-out selection of activities, with the reasons why they were being done in a particular way.

Further Information:

If you or your setting would be interested in taking part in a creative thinking and learning project, Sheringham Nursery would be happy to discuss the possibility through their teaching and learning programme. Further information can be accessed on the website. Do get in touch www.sheringham-nur.org.uk

Creative Thinking and Learning Project Model

Outline for a 2 term project

- Meeting with host setting (Nursery School or EY setting) to discuss project aims and objectives. This would include identifying other linked settings and or childminders who could benefit from taking part.
- 3 training days with gap tasks between each session for participating settings
- Consultant half-day follow-up visits to all settings involved to mentor and support practice. This could also include a half-day follow up for a childminder group.
- 1 day community celebration event where settings come together (usually at the host setting) to showcase their work and share impact and progress from the project. Settings and childminders would also be encouraged to set up their own 'in-house' celebration event for parents and children to participate in.
- Evaluation of project, feedback from children, families and practitioners, aims and developments for the future.

Acknowledgements

Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre would like to thank the following people:

The children, families, practitioners and early years settings in Manor Park who took part in the project – thank you for all your hard work and enthusiasm.

The settings involved in the project:

Sheringham Nursery School and Children's
Centre
Kool Kidze
Chestnuts at Susan Lawrence
HeadStart

Wisdom Kids
Imaan Pre-School
SmartStarts
Little Rainbow



Anni McTavish – early years creative arts consultant
The Manor Park Early Years Forum group of settings
The Childminder Network and Tracey Warden, Childminder Co-ordinator
Parent and Toddler group and crèche
The London Borough of Newham
Governors

This publication has been written by Anni McTavish with contributions from the project participants, including Julian Grenier, Head of Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre, Helen Currie, Assistant Head Teacher, Lesley Webb, Deputy, practitioners from Sheringham Nursery School, Early Years Forum group of settings and childminders from the Sheringham Network. Thanks are also due to Judith Stevens, whose Manor Park Talks (2012) booklet provided a very helpful and positive model for this project's write-up.