



SchemaPlay

A Community Interest Company

SchemaPlay: Child-centred learning through free-flow play

Focus: Containing Scheme

“In SchemaPlay we are constantly emphasising the importance of Schemes in early childhood education. Just think for a moment about how important the concept of ‘Containing’ really is. It is a totally abstract idea that we begin to play with as babies, long before we know anything about how adults differentiate between dishes, cups and other containers. As a young child, it is just as much fun and of interest to put our dinner into a pocket as it is to put it into a dish. If you think about it, what is significant is that every container has an inside, and outside and it has some form of barrier between the two; and that includes our pockets!

As we get older we discover we can contain all kinds of things, even ourselves in boxes. Adults are constantly using words that relate to containing, and support us putting our feet ‘into our wellies’, getting ‘in’ and ‘out of a car seat’ and, even rather strangely sometimes, ‘into the outdoor play area’! Later we learn that that we live inside a town, that is inside a county, which is inside a country and a continent, on a planet! Everything we classify we have at first put into an imagined container - solids, liquids gases, invertebrates and mammals and, when we recognise a pattern, we do this by separating it in our minds from the same materials without a pattern. Very soon, metaphorically, ‘containing’ has become such a big part of our lives that we are no longer aware of the concrete and practical roots of its construction in our minds. When we are busy, we talk about; ‘how difficult it is to fit things **in**’, we talk about; ‘falling **in** love’ and ‘falling **out** with each other’. Most of the time we are too busy living life, to be thinking about it all that much. ***Except that we really do have to be thinking about schemes*** when we are working with young children, because it is the schemes that provide the foundations for everything else that they learn in life, and the firmer those foundations are, the more children will learn.”

As discussed in the Trajectory Scheme focus resource, from birth a baby constantly experiences being contained; in a cot, in blankets, in a car seat, etc. As the infant becomes more independent and mobile, he or she will often become interested to see how they can contain themselves and how other objects can be contained. A child with a containing scheme will often explore objects that have an affordance of being a container and will start to develop a perception of the characteristics of containers, as well as objects that can be contained. They may also through their exploratory play perceive differences in size, shape, space and volume. This feature’s case study, provided by SchemaPlay’s Licenced Trainer for Tops Day Nurseries, Simon Evans, offers an account of a two year old child containing. But, first, it is worth exploring how a containing scheme is defined.

A Containing Scheme Definition:

Children applying a containing scheme in a nursery are often observed continually putting things into and out of different types of containers. Treasure baskets can facilitate early independent exploration of this: Offering different types of containers, and fluid objects such as ribbons, chains, socks and other fabrics, as well as solid objects such as small balls, blocks and bangles all facilitate the child’s exploration of how objects fit and do not fit into the containers provided.

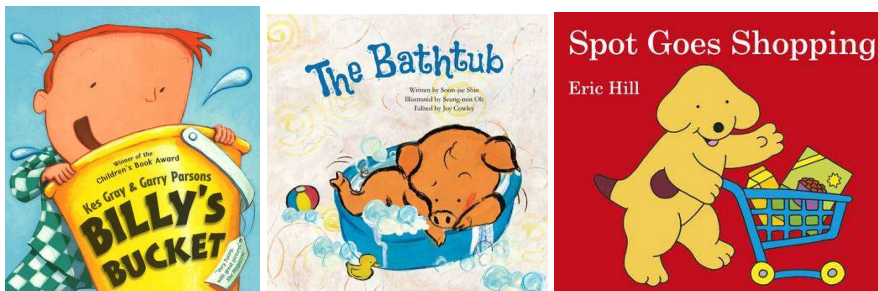
Baskets, buckets, bags, carts, boxes may be explored by toddlers. Any containers offered should be provided with groups of objects, so that filling and emptying is enjoyed, and there should also be opportunities for children to contain themselves in boxes, crates, cubbies and tents (discovering how they fit – further exploring the inside, the outside and the barrier between the two). This early exploration of grouping objects into containers – into ‘sets’ - is a pre-requisite scheme for later mathematics, we need to be able to contain two sets of quantities in our mind before adding 3 + 4 abstractly, for example.

Having identified a containing scheme we can take educational advantage of it in many different ways. For example, we could encourage water play with three different height tubes, or sand play with three different width buckets. Playdough with three different height tins may also be enjoyed; as children fill and empty the containers, we are fostering a perception of volume and size.

Older children might enjoy role-play scenarios which include an aspect of containing, such as supermarket role-play or café role-play, which can promote their learning to apply containing in sorting and grouping. We can promote their awareness of shape, space and quantities, as well as offering a meaningful context for counting and perhaps later recording.

Language and Literacy

It is not unusual for a young child to verbalise their exploratory actions; perhaps saying, “in”, “out”, “went in”, “get out”, “more in”, “all gone”, etc, whilst exploring a containing scheme. This early prepositional and positional language, as well as verbs, “going inside” supports their language development and understandings, which we can then build upon by reading stories with containing in the story line.



As was identified in the trajectory scheme focus, we can identify schemes in the metaphors that we use. Schemes help to make sense of words and many popular phrases. Metaphors with the containing scheme include phrases, such as:

“Digging yourself **into** a hole”.

“Going **in** feet first”.

“Dip your toe **in** the water”.

When we identify a containing scheme in a child’s play, it is important to ‘seed’ resources in the continuous provision for this scheme to be applied to a range of contexts. This supports the child’s understanding of the objects in our environment; such as what a tin, or a pushchair is, and what it does, and can also support the child’s problem solving skills and independent play. Young children constantly apply a dominant scheme –because it is a novelty to them and just like when we all learn to do something new, the children are keen to repeat it. Children might sometimes be considered to be displaying inappropriate behaviour, such as when they empty all the resources in a box onto

the nursery floor, when in fact all that they are trying to do is to explore their scheme, and it may be that there are limited opportunities for them to do so.

We might therefore consider seeding the following in our environment:

Crates, building blocks, posting tubes and balls, blankets, a range of fabrics, pots and pans in role-play with groups of foods, bags and shopping trolleys with groups of packages/foods to purchase. Nesting dolls, buckets and tubes in sand and water play, tunnels and tents, wet sand/dry sand with sensory items hidden to find and explore may also be enjoyed, along with handling and containing Playdough, foam, rice, and soil.

As we observe a child developing competencies in applying a containing scheme across the continuous provision, we can offer new activities within the child's ZPD, their 'Zone of Proximal Development' (when a challenge is offered in a new activity within the child's capabilities to extend their learning and development). The new activities anchored in containing, something that the child feels esteemed and competent to do, can support new operational schemes and new schema interests/knowledge to develop. Building upon a child's schemes to support new schemes will not only support a child's 'flow', their full immersion in activity as they combine schemes to develop their play themes, but also their engagement across the EYFS curriculum.

CONTAINING CASE STUDY FROM TOPS DAY NURSERY, POOLE

Obs 1: "J" is in the outdoor mud kitchen. She has selected a jug and appears to be enjoying repeatedly filling it with water and then emptying it. "J" announces, "Look water!"

Later in the morning, "J" is observed transporting water from a jug into different sized bowls. Noticing this, her educator considered a provocation to perhaps extend the play theme further, by adding mud to the largest bowl. "J" noticed this and started to copy. Later, "J" was observed adding some leaves to the water and mud. J's perception of containers is developing. She has identified that water can be contained in a sink, in a jug or a bowl and that mud and leaves can also be contained.

J continued scooping mud and leaves into containers moving the mixture between the bowls and the sink for over 15 minutes.

From this observation J's educator identified that J was applying containing, transporting and transforming schemes in her play and responded to this observation by offering a focussed activity – planting herbs. The planting activity was offered to enable J to draw upon her containing and transporting schemes and to support knowledge of plants. J's educator appreciated the importance of J having some idea of what 'planting' is before introducing the activity and first read stories to support J's developing knowledge and understanding of planting and the care needs of plants, linking their needs to our own needs, such as the need to drink water when we are thirsty. Over the weeks that followed J's planting activity, she took care of her own plants, watering them as necessary and noticing that they were dry in sunny weather, but did not need watering when it was raining. J was now combining a containing, transporting and trajectory scheme in her self-chosen play.

In order to support J's enjoyment in containing and transporting, J's key person also considered the resources available across the continuous provision for J to apply the schemes in a range of contexts in her own self-chosen activity.

A review of activities highlighted that pots and pans are available in the home corner with groups of foods to contain (containing and transporting). Pushchairs, blankets and dolls are accessible in the garden and classroom (transporting/containing). A wheelbarrow and groups of building blocks are accessible outside (transporting/containing). Paints are stored in pots at the easel and children can refill these, and a salad spinner is on offer for children to transfer paint into to create abstract paintings (transforming). In the small-world area, there is a seeded doll's house and furniture, barns and farm animals. In the craft area, there are coloured stones and frames to create pictures, and wet sand and sticks fostering mark-making.. To support transforming, transporting and containing outdoors, clay, sand, mud, feathers, bark, spades, shovels and a pestle and mortar are available. Indoors, to support the transforming scheme further, J's key person added playdough, rolling pins and cake tins.

Obs 2: J is in the sand play area. She has selected two chairs from the doll's house and it would appear that they have been selected due to their affordance of being able to be used as a 'scoop'.

J is totally immersed in her play of transporting sand from one chair to another. J says to her key person, "Look!" J points to the chairs and smiles. J is using verbal language and gestures to support her communication and interest in the chairs being used as a container.

J's self-esteem and enjoyment in learning appears to be driven at this time by her interest in applying a containing and transporting scheme to different contexts.

In response to this activity, J's practitioner added a range of one handed tools to scoop sand, water, and mud with. Three different width bowls to the sand play and three different height tubes were also added to the water play table to support J's perception of volume and size. Groups/collections of objects both indoors and outdoors were added with baskets, so that J could transport and contain the objects, should she choose to do so.

J's practitioner also considered stories with containing and transporting in the story line, adding props for J to be able to later engage in these stories independently.

Obs 3: J is sitting in the classroom. She has selected a large tin of shells and some baskets. She has been sitting for over twenty minutes playing with this activity. She is picking up each shell very carefully and exploring it; turning it around in her hands, touching it – appearing to notice that some of the shells have pointy edges and she seems to be sorting the shells by the properties of pointy shells, flat shells and shells with holes in them.

J's practitioner responded to this observation by keeping the shells available for further spontaneous shelf-chosen activity, but also seeded other sorting, transporting and containing activities. As J was also revisiting the planting and watering activities daily, J's practitioner also decided to offer a planting activity whereby plants needed to be matched to pots that were the same size. The plants were laid out in a line in from the biggest plant to the smallest and J enjoyed sorting the pots by size to match the plants (early grading).

By enabling these schemes to be combined in play, J's practitioner has noticed that J's play themes and immersion in her play is usually anything between 15 minutes and 40 minutes. She appears very esteemed and self-motivated and keen to explore both the indoor and outdoor environment independently. J is confidently handling many one handed tools and keen to identify objects that are the same (sorting supporting matching), and explores similarities and

differences with great interest. She is also developing an awareness of her needs for water and the needs of other living species – caring for plants.