

A parent's guide to... heuristic play

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Last month we looked at 'treasure-basket play', which involves putting out natural objects for babies. This month we are looking at how this type of play can be developed with toddlers into something known as 'heuristic play'.

The term 'heuristic play' comes from the Greek word to 'discover', while incorporating the idea that children will be playing. As with treasure baskets, this type of play is credited to Elinor Goldschmied and Sonia Jackson, who wrote and lectured about it. So, why is heuristic play used in settings and, more importantly, how might you provide it at home?

It is one of life's little ironies that two-year-olds often enjoy playing with the box rather than the toy inside. This interest in real objects rather than toys is key to understanding why toddlers will often concentrate and learn more from heuristic play rather than from toys alone. So, what might you see if your child's nursery provides heuristic play? The answer is quite simple: junk!

Clean, safe junk, of course. But nonetheless at first sight an arbitrary collection of bits and pieces of different sizes that might otherwise belong around the house or in the recycle bin. Metal tins, plastic bottles,

curlers and wooden curtain rings are typical of materials that might be set out. Anything other than toys. What makes it fascinating to watch, though, is the way that toddlers sit, focus and find interesting things to do with the bits and pieces that have been set out for them.

ORGANISATION

In many nurseries and playgroups, heuristic play might be put out each day or several times a week. Many childcare settings will set out 'piles' of material so that each toddler can have their own collection. This is because while many toddlers are interested in others, they are not yet good at sharing and negotiating. Having a separate collection for each child, therefore, means that each child can focus, concentrate and explore alone.

As with treasure-basket play, the role of the adult is not to organise the play, but to 'sit back' a little so that the toddler can be totally independent. This is often a time when staff will carry out observations on children as well as supervising them for safety reasons.

BENEFITS

There are huge benefits for toddlers when this type of play is available. Firstly, it is

a good way for them to feel independent of adults and to do exactly what they please. Toddlers also develop good hand-eye co-ordination and also concepts of shape and sizes. They also learn about the properties and textures of the materials that they are handling, for example, that fabrics do not make a sound when dropped into a saucepan, but corks do. Perhaps, most of all, heuristic play helps toddlers to concentrate and persevere. These are life skills of untold importance!



PROVIDING HEURISTIC PLAY AT HOME

You may be reading this article and seeing that, in some measure, your toddler is already doing a bit of heuristic play. This is not surprising, as toddlers almost naturally seem to be interested in everyday objects. If you wish to create heuristic play, though, the key is to look out for groups of objects so that your child has plenty of different combinations and so, multiple opportunities.

Below are items that work well, but note that this is not an exhaustive list:

- metal containers such as saucepans and empty food and biscuit tins in various sizes (make sure that the edges are not sharp);
- plastic bottles of various sizes;
- fabrics of different textures and sizes;
- lids from bottles, saucepans and tins;
- rubber plunger, kitchen roll holder;

CASE STUDY

'Since Savi turned two, I have found keeping him happy a struggle. He seems quite active and restless, but apparently this is normal for his age. I learnt about heuristic play from a posting on a parents' internet site and thought I would give it a go. It feels like quite a natural way for children to learn and, best of all, I found that Savi really loves it.

'He often sits amid a pile of stuff and is totally focused on doing one thing, such as posting

straws into a bottle. At first I was unsure what to put out, but now I am more relaxed because, apart from safety, there are no 'rules'. My latest find has been keys.

'I found several large ones in a drawer and added them in. He loved them and spent 15 minutes dropping them in and out of different pots and pans. At first, I used to put everything back in its place at home, but now I store everything, apart from saucepans, in a large cardboard box.'

- corks, shells, wooden rings, wooden and plastic clothes pegs; and
- plastic bracelets, cardboard tubes, hair curlers and spoons.

WATCHING YOUR TODDLER AT PLAY

If you do decide to provide heuristic play at home, it can be worth making a note of what seems to be of interest to your child so that you can add related items.

One thing that you are likely to notice is that your child often repeats movements and ideas over and over again. This is normal play behaviour for toddlers and the key thing is to provide sufficient items so that they can do this. Below are some common ways in which toddlers interact with heuristic play:

Putting things in containers. Many toddlers love dropping things into containers. They may drop corks into plastic bottles or drop wooden pegs into tins. Their interest in putting things in and out of

containers means that it is worthwhile putting out a range of containers of different sizes, as well as smaller objects that can fit inside.

Banging. Many toddlers love making noise! Sound is a great source of stimulation for children so, if you can bear it, put out some metal containers such as biscuit tins and tin lids so that your child can explore different sounds.

Moving things from one place to another. Many toddlers enjoy the sensation of taking things from one place to another. You may find that if you put out several containers, your child may well 'pour' items from one tin or box into another. They may also enjoy walking from one place to another carrying their prized items.

MORE INFORMATION

Positive relationships: A parent's guide to...treasure baskets, www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/1079440/Positive-Relationships-parents-guide-treasure-baskets/?DCMP=ILC-SEARCH