

We are born wired to interact and seek relationships with others. This paves the way for learning and deepens understanding. This is particularly important during the first three years of life when the brain is developing rapidly. Sensitive interactions at this time not only foster brain development by connecting synapses which manage resilience, stress, emotions and self-regulation but also provide a model for later interactions.

In theory

Attachment theory tells us positive and secure relationships enable children to feel safe enough to explore the world and interact with others. With patience and empathy children become able to manage feelings rather than become overwhelmed by them. These childhood interactions later determine a person's self, worldview and later relationships (Bowlby 1969).

Secure early attachments are paramount. A well publicised study of Romanian orphans adopted in the UK found while infants six months or younger overcame much of their trauma, many of the older children experienced social, emotional and mental health issues well into adulthood. Other research indicates undue childhood distress can actually cause brain abnormalities. Secure attachment establishes healthy self-esteem and fosters positive learning dispositions and resilience. Children become more prepared to take risks, try new things and mistakes become a positive part of learning.

Social constructivism is an approach to teaching and learning in which interaction is crucial. Meaning and knowledge come from connecting individual and social contexts, sharing ideas and adjusting those ideas in response to new experiences (Bates, 2011; Azzarito and Ennis, 2003). Vygotsky (1978) stated interaction with an adult or More Knowledgeable Other could enable a child to move across the zone of proximal development (ZPD), that is the gap between what a child can do alone and what they could potentially achieve. This was later termed scaffolding by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976). Rejecting a one-size-fits-all view, scaffolding requires a child centred approach focussing upon individual development with prior knowledge as the starting point (Prawat 1992). Other theorists such as Froebel, Montessori and Steiner share this perspective. It is also enshrined in the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework which sets out the standards for all early years settings.

In practice

Research suggests educational outcomes are significantly improved by the quantity and quality of adult-child interactions (DfE 2015). A large scale study (EPEY 2002) found teaching based on scaffolding and 'sustained shared thinking' or

mutual construction of knowledge or skills (2002, p49) was particularly effective. This requires tuning into the child and supporting needs in a developmentally appropriate way, whether through assistance, participation or direct instruction. When both the adult and child are 'motivated and involved' in interactions learning can flow both ways between them. Children then are able to move across the ZPD and construct understanding in a relevant and meaningful way.

Balancing act

Effective early education lies in the middle of the continuum between unstructured child initiated activities and highly structured adult initiated activities (DfE 2015). The right balance results in 'hands on, brain on' play rather than 'hands on, brain off' (DCSF 2009). Practice which avoids 'how many', 'what colour' type questions, and mixes direct instruction with mutual dialogue is more effective in supporting this.

There is a clear need to interact in a positive and meaningful way with children and to sustain shared thinking and mutual dialogue that maximises learning. Such interaction reveals a child's learning dispositions; develops self awareness or reflection; and facilitates the co-construction of learning.



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