

RESPONSE TO SANDRA SMIDT'S REFLECTIONS ARTICLE

I have been reading Sandra's article 'The plays the thing...' and I had a couple of questions. I recently attended a course on outstanding practice in the Early Years and it was based around the idea that children need some sort of adult intervention to move them from the practice zone into the learning zone. My difficulty is I sometimes feel I am intruding when I join a pupil's play world and my contribution feels a little contrived. I also feel we can stifle a child's spontaneity if we interfere. What are your thoughts on the best way of ensuring a child's play situation is a truly meaningful learning experience and how best can we as teachers support that?

Michelle Garcia Diaz, Early Years Teacher

Sandra Smidt writes:

How nice to have a response to my article on play. I find it is a subject that really raises some fierce debate as people protect their own views from the possibility of having to change. I am writing a book on play and the (edited) article on the TACTYC website forms the first chapter – the theoretical framework. The more I read and the more I write the more confused I am at first and then the more certain I am of my conclusions. So it is very common to feel unsettled by the views of other people. I am certain of a few things:

Play is one of the ways in which children learn best because (according to my definition) the child has chosen what to do and how to do it and, thus, it is always purposeful. So a question or an idea appears in the child's mind (possibly because of a previous experience, because of a story the adult has read, because something in the setting challenges the child) and the child sets out to find an explanation or an answer or to express feelings. I dislike profoundly the idea of a practice zone and a learning zone. The child learns from all experiences and may well repeat something in order to check again or reinforce or re-experience something. So practice is part of learning. I do accept Vygotsky's zone of proximal development and I do accept the importance of interaction between the learner and others – children and/or adults. For me all learning is social. But that is a complex argument and there is not time to go into it in any depths here.

I also accept that adults have a role to play in enhancing and supporting learning and they do this best in several ways. Knowing as much as possible about the child and her previous experience, her culture and language(s) is vital. Watching and listening to the child to find out what the child is paying attention to or interested in; sometimes providing particular resources or set up a context to support that interest; discovering what it is that the child is paying attention to in the play in order to sometimes and sensitively share the focus of attention and comment (not test or question).

I think you are perfectly justified in your fears of taking over and the interventions of adults are often contrived. If you don't have the urge to join in the play, don't! Not all of us can do that naturally. But you can make comments that will allow the child to recognise that you are paying attention; you can offer help; you can talk about something similar you have done or seen.

I hope this is helpful and do come back to me if this is not clear. It is difficult to write about this in an email – hence the book!

Janet Moyles comments:

agree wholeheartedly with what you say both about intrusion and stifling spontaneity. There is also a problem between interaction and intervention which we've none of us

properly resolved yet. I think, on the whole, that we should support children's play by what we provide and how we discuss it with them rather than through 'intrusion'.

Child-initiated play should, in my opinion, be just that. You can 'control' to a certain extent, what they initiate by the provision that is made. Pat Broadhead's work on the 'whatever you want it to be place' is very interesting in that the adult makes provision through boxes, fabrics and other bits and pieces and the children turn it into whatever they want it to be. This would seem the most appropriate way plus, as I said above, talking WITH the children when the play has to be brought to an end, about what they were doing and what they appeared to get out of it. Also, of course, the old chestnut observation must be key in the play context – quiet and unobtrusive observation can, as you'll be aware, tell us so much about what children are thinking and learning. Perhaps even taking some photographs of how children are playing (with their permission, of course!) and then talking with them afterwards using the photographs as prompts.

Other comments could really add much to this debate. Keep the responses flowing in please!