

On Your Marks!!

Encouraging mark making- developing writing

Children and
Learning



Mark making and role-play 3: adult-child interaction

Getting interaction right

This for me is the crucial factor in successful teaching in Early Years. The quality of the interaction between adults and children is vital, for language development, behaviour and social interaction. In fact, effective pre-school provision has been summed up in one sentence: *'Whether the adults have time to answer children's questions'*. This assumes that there are enough adults to talk with children, that children know how to ask questions, and that they are stimulated enough to want to ask questions in the first place! *Crucially, it assumes that talking with children is the number one priority in Early Years settings.*

Interaction is the best word to sum up quality talk with children. At home, most learning comes through incidental chat about what children are doing, and things that children are interested in. Studies of three pre-school children at home have shown that once children become competent talkers, conversations between adults and children are usually started by *the children*. However, once children start school the balance changes, with adults doing most of the talking, and particularly asking lots of questions.

(See 'Young Children Learning' by B. Tizard & M. Hughes, (2002, Blackwell Publishing) for a detailed account of this fascinating study.)

Once you have planned to spend time in the role-play area, here are some ways to make it *quality* time, by thinking about *how* we talk. Let's imagine we have set up a café...

Commenting on what children are doing is usually the first starting point: 'Oh, You are frying an egg! That's nice. I like eggs!' Not only will you get an egg, but also you will have given the children the option to respond to your comment.

Encouraging children to comment on what you are doing. Here you may have to model the types of activities that could happen in the role play, like taking orders in a café: 'Michael, I'd like a burger too!' / 'Michael, what are you writing?' / 'Michael why are you taking so long with my toast?' / 'Michael can I have a turn as the waiter?'

Commenting on what children do and say with each other. E.g. two children agree to take turns to be the waiter and the customer: 'I like the way you agreed to take turns. That's a good idea. Can I have a turn as well?'

Pointing out appropriate behaviour to other children. 'I like the way that Stefan asked the customer to sit down. That's what waiters do in café's. Ours is going to be a happy café.'

Commenting on your feelings, about real life events related to your play.

'I love cafes, especially when you get hot chocolate and a nice currant bun.'

Talking about what you don't like (children love this more than anything!) 'I really don't like sugar in my tea' / 'I hate it when people drop food on the floor and then put it on my plate!'

Encouraging children to talk about real life experiences. This usually happens spontaneously, and for me is always very exciting: 'My daddy took some of my chips in Mcdonalds, and mummy told him off. / My big sister gets a milk shake but I'm only allowed juice 'cos of my eczema. /My baby sister dropped her cake on the floor and the waitress trod on it.'

What we are doing here, through our language and behaviour, is dipping in and out of role, so that we can strike the balance between being on the same level as the children in the role-play, modelling and rewarding appropriate behaviour by being the adult in charge, and developing children's language. Once we get this balance right we can start thinking about how we might promote mark-making, and other areas of learning.

Getting the right balance between adult-led, adult-supported and child initiated play and language

We would hope that children will become independent learners in the role-play area, so they can, among other things, enjoy role-playing mark making. However it can take some time to get to this point, and adults can help by the way that they spend time in the area. Particularly while setting up the area, there may need to be a lot of *adult-led* behaviour and play; e.g. when we are establishing agreed rules for how to behave and play with each other, and keep the area in good order.

As children become confident in the area, adults can move to *adult-supported* behaviour, as in most of the examples above.

Once the area is established, we would hope to see more *child-initiated* activity, where the children are starting their own play routines. Adults can drop into this child-initiated play whenever they think it is appropriate (but try to practice 'ear wiggling' on conversations between children without joining in yourself: this can be very revealing!)

Once the balance is right, you are likely to find that the role-play area becomes an area that is valued by the children: they see it as a valid place to be, because the adults spend time there. They also find it stimulating because there is a lot to do that stimulates different areas of learning, as well as being a great place to have fun.

Finally, the mark making can begin!

For an exploration of these ideas, on the balance between adult-led and adult-supported behaviour in practice, see an article in Nursery World titled 'Attention Seeking' at www.talk4meaning.co.uk in the Every Child a Talker page, and click the 'articles' button.