

Understanding Play Schemas

Scribbles Day Nursery
Our Passion, Their Future



Meet your SENCO



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*I work in partnership with children, families
and practitioners to support individual
learning needs and to help every child feel
understood, included and able to thrive.*

What are play schemas?

A schema is a repeated pattern of behaviour that children use as they play, explore and make sense of the world around them. These patterns may appear in everyday moments, such as throwing, lining up toys, hiding objects, wrapping items, filling bags, spinning wheels or building enclosed spaces.

Although some behaviours can look unusual, messy or challenging from an adult perspective, they often have a clear developmental purpose. Through repetition, children test ideas, build connections and strengthen their understanding of movement, space, cause and effect, problem-solving and relationships between objects.

Common play schemas

- **Trajectory:** exploring movement through space, such as throwing, dropping, jumping, pouring or rolling.
- **Transporting:** moving objects, resources or themselves from one place to another using bags, pockets, baskets, trucks or arms.

- **Enveloping:** covering, hiding or wrapping objects, or covering themselves with blankets, fabric or boxes.
- **Enclosing:** creating boundaries, building fences, making dens, placing objects inside containers or sitting in small spaces.
- **Rotation:** showing interest in objects or movements that spin, turn, twist or roll, such as wheels, taps, lids or circular marks.
- **Positioning:** carefully lining up, stacking, sorting, arranging or grouping objects by colour, size, shape or order.
- **Connecting:** joining items together, building structures, linking train tracks, sticking, tying, taping or taking things apart.

Why schemas matter

Recognising schemas helps adults understand what a child may be trying to learn through their play. This can support stronger relationships, more responsive interactions and more meaningful learning opportunities at home and in nursery.

For example, a child who repeatedly drops food or toys may not be trying to be defiant. They may be exploring a trajectory schema: learning about gravity, movement, sound, distance and adult

responses. When we understand the learning behind the behaviour, we can guide children calmly and safely while still respecting their curiosity.

How parents can support schema play

- **Observe first:** look for repeated actions across different types of play.
- **Name the learning:** think about what your child may be exploring, such as movement, containment, order or connection.
- **Offer safe alternatives:** if throwing is unsafe, provide soft balls, beanbags, bubbles or outdoor targets.
- **Provide open-ended resources:** baskets, boxes, fabric, tubes, blocks, loose parts, vehicles, ramps and water play can support many schemas.
- **Join in sensitively:** follow your child's lead, add language and gently extend the play without taking over.
- **Share observations:** speak with nursery staff if you notice repeated patterns at home so we can work together consistently.

Helpful reminder: Schemas are not fixed labels. Children may explore one schema strongly, move between several schemas, or show different patterns depending on their age, interests, environment and stage of development.

Try this at home:

Offer simple open-ended materials such as boxes, fabric, baskets, tubes and blocks. These can be sorted, carried, filled, emptied, stacked, connected and transformed in many different ways.

POSITIONING SCHEMA PLAY PROMPTS



ROAD TAPE + CARS

Place road tape / painters tape along the floor and low lying tables in your play space. Invite your child to drive cars and trains along the road.

This simple activity will help your child to explore the positioning schema as part of a simple morning workout.

You can also try different prompts: e.g. can you line up the cars from longest to shortest? or can you make a pattern with the cars? e.g. red, blue, red, blue.



SET THE TABLE

Children exploring the positioning schema may like to help out with practical life tasks so now is a great time to encourage it!

A simple task is to invite your child to set their table ready for lunch and dinner. Once they've mastered the skill, try making this task part of their role in helping the family prepare for dinner.



SORTING OBJECTS

This activity can be used for both the positioning and enclosing schemas of play. In this photo we used multicoloured cubes and mini hoops, but you can use any items that you might have available at home.

Categorising objects by colour will help your child extend their vocabulary (naming the name for colours) as well as explore the positioning schema.

Playful Home.

Further reading and contact

- Barnardos: An Introduction to Schemas
- Twinkl: What is Schematic Play?
- Education Scotland: Schemas — Learning through Play



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Supporting children's unique ways of learning through play, observation and partnership with families.