



BLOG:

Three Simple Ways to Support Discovery Play in Your Baby Room



If you've ever watched a baby repeatedly push a spoon off their highchair, roll a ball across the floor or play with water coming out of a tap, you've witnessed discovery play in action. To adults, these moments can sometimes look repetitive or even purposeless. But to babies, they are full of questions.

What happens if I do it again? Does it always make that sound? Why does this object feel different from the last one?

Discovery play lies at the heart of babies' learning. Long before they can explain their thinking in words, babies are observing, experimenting and building theories about how the world works.

Developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik has explained that babies are born to be scientific thinkers, constantly testing ideas and revising their understanding through experience (Gopnik, 2009, 2016). Every action is an experiment that helps them to make sense of the physical world around them. For those of us who work with babies, supporting discovery play doesn't require expensive equipment or carefully planned activities. What it really involves is slowing down, looking at familiar resources with fresh eyes and creating the conditions in which babies can follow their own curiosity. Here are three simple ways to make discovery play a bigger part of everyday life in your work with babies - whether you're in a baby room or a childminder working with babies.



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DISCOVERY HAPPENS WHEN BABIES CAN INVESTIGATE MATERIALS IN LOTS OF DIFFERENT WAYS

The first is to think carefully about the resources you provide. Discovery happens when babies can investigate materials in lots of different ways, so open-ended objects are often far more valuable than toys with a single purpose. A wooden spoon can be mouthed, banged, rolled or balanced. Open-ended objects are powerful opportunities for a baby to carry out experiments through which they can find out about texture, weight, temperature, sound and motion. This is one reason why Elinor Goldschmied's treasure basket remains such a powerful tool in our work with babies. A thoughtfully chosen collection of everyday objects gives babies endless opportunities to compare, explore and experiment through their own self-directed play.



The second way to support discovery play is perhaps the simplest, yet often the hardest in a busy baby room: protect uninterrupted time. Babies don't make discoveries in a hurry.

Like scientists, they repeat experiments, make tiny adjustments and notice subtle differences in what happens each time. What can look like them doing the same thing over and over again is often a sophisticated process of testing ideas. A baby who repeatedly fills and empties a container is exploring much more than putting things in and taking them out; they are learning about space, volume, weight and cause and effect. Chris Athey's work on schemas reminds us that these repeated patterns are evidence of deep thinking rather than aimless behaviour (Athey, 1990). Whenever possible, try to create periods of the day where babies can stay absorbed in their explorations without being hurried on to the next activity.

Finally, consider your own role during discovery play. Our instinct as educators is often to demonstrate, praise or ask lots of questions, but babies don't need us to make their discoveries more meaningful. Often, they simply need us to be present. When we sit nearby, watch attentively and share their curiosity, this creates the emotional security that allows exploration to flourish. Anita Hughes (2010) suggests that adults who are physically comfortable and able to observe calmly are much more likely to sustain this kind of attentive presence. Rather than asking questions with right answers, try wondering aloud instead: "I wonder why that one rolled further?" or "That made a different sound." These aren't tests of what babies know; they're invitations to stay curious together.

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Perhaps the biggest message about discovery play is that it isn't something we add to the timetable. It is already happening throughout the day. Babies are making discoveries during mealtimes, while changing nappies, out in the garden and on the floor with a basket of everyday objects. Our role is not to create curiosity but to protect the natural curiosity they have been born with. When we provide interesting materials, generous amounts of time and our own calm, attentive presence, we give babies the opportunity to do what they are internally driven to do: explore, experiment and gradually build an understanding of the world around them.



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