

BLOG: THE WORLD OF PURE IMAGINATION... BECOMING A MAGICAL PLAY PARTNER

At Childhaven Nursery School we believe that children not only require an effective play and learning environment, but most importantly practitioners who understand how to actively and efficiently join children in their play. This will support and develop learning in the most powerful way through their imagination.

Maria Montessori once said, “Play is children’s work.” So where does the adult fit into this work? Is the adult the leader, coach, co-player?

While play may be the work of children, the work does not get done single-handedly. Quality play experiences are created and nurtured when adults are involved in the process.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) states that “the adult interacts with intention and a clear purpose in mind but it is the child who leads and directs the activity. In the middle of the continuum is guided play, which has some level of adult involvement. Examples might include a group of children engaged in pretend play where the adult plans a scenario to take the play and conversation in a new direction.”

Being a play partner requires knowledge and skill, and of course requires patience. The adults may make suggestions or bring additional resources or provocations to the play and follow what the child is interested in.

There is something very special when you take on a role in a child’s play; from being a pirate, a dinosaur or an explorer searching for treasure in a desert island, it can feel like we have entered another realm!

Birth to 5 Matters (2021) highlights that “practitioners are most effective when they use some of the features of play to engage and motivate children, by ensuring that they are playful – with elements of choice, hands-on experience, connections to children’s interests, and enjoyment.

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

Let’s take look at this photograph. A group of children began by mixing mud and water together to make thick sticky mud. The adult began by observing, then a child invited her in to the play.

“We are making lunch for the mud monster!” “The mud monster!?” The adult responded. “What does he look like?”

The adult looks around the area in search for the mud monster. She crouches down to the child’s level and looks closely into the pot of mud. Together the adult and the children take the adventure further. Mud costumes are put on, together with wellies and binoculars they go on a search together, making food and avoiding obstacles and challenges along the way!

The children write letters to the mud monster’s family, with lots of ideas and questions written and delivered through the magic portal. We create our own story through role play together, sharing the use of language and extending our thoughts and ideas.





The EEF states that, “while studies often consider teaching and modelling language through story, there is also evidence to suggest that the same practices can be effective in contexts beyond stories.”

Practitioners tuning into a child’s world of imagination and taking on an active role will witness children gain more self-assurance, creativity and determination as time passes.

More importantly we realise that we are no longer just an observer by entering their world. We actively participate in their imagination, dreams, and passions.

Greg Bottrill says that “when we believe in magic and have faith in children’s imagination, we can enter a world of story and dream.”

Experience has taught me that sometimes the best way to connect with children is to immerse myself in their world, embrace their passions, and have some fun along the way.

References:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/communication-and-language>

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/communication-and-language>

<https://birthto5matters.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Birthto5Matters-download.pdf>

Blog written: March 2025



THANK YOU FOR READING.

JADE HARTLEY, SENIOR ADVANCED TEACHING ASSISTANT AT
CHILDHAVEN NURSERY SCHOOL, SCARBOROUGH