

On message

It's important to get parents to support their children's schematic behaviour, explains *Helen Petrie*

Most of us, as early years professionals, will have witnessed the relief on a parent's face when you explain that their child's schematic behaviour is perfectly normal!

One instance was during a parent's initial visit to our playgroup St Winefride's in Holywell, Flintshire. I noticed her daughter lay a doll flat on the home-corner work surface then cover it completely with a blanket, then a scarf, then another. When I explained that this was typical of a child with an enveloping schema, she looked relieved, and reassured that her daughter's actions were not indicative of any developmental delay.

Given parents' and carers' bewilderment about schematic play, we decided to develop their understanding through an evening forum, as part of our commitment to working in partnership with them.

Attending two workshops by schema expert Stella Louis (see below) provided the inspiration, and we were later invited to present our work at an Estyn forum in Cardiff.

EVENING FORUM

We encouraged parents to arrange babysitters so that they could make the most of the evening event, and beforehand, we laid out sets of resources associated with supporting common schemas. Included in the sets were easily available – and

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cheap – household items. On the evening, parents and staff sat in a circle and, following a brief explanation of a common schema, a staff member showed the parents the related resources.

We discussed typical behaviour and the learning associated with each schema, such as mathematical concepts of quantity, distance, and capacity. Parents and staff then chatted informally, and it was great to hear parents and grandparents recognise their children's schematic behaviour at home.

At the end of the evening, we gave parents a checklist to complete over the coming week, so encouraging them to observe and record any schematic behaviour that their children had displayed.

AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE



Schema expert Stella Louis has now written an essential little guide to help early years settings develop parents' and carers' understanding of their children's schematic behaviour.

Commissioned by Suffolk County Council, *Schemas for parents* sets out in simple, accessible language:

- what a schema is
- its links to early brain development
- typical behaviour and learning associated with common schemas
- how parents can support their child's schematic play.

There are also further reading suggestions, useful for both parents and practitioners.

The guide is small (14cm x 14cm), spiral bound, well illustrated and has a minimum of text, making it 'unthreatening' to parents and carers, who may feel daunted by information on brain development and early learning.

'What a gem!' says Professor Tina Bruce of the guide. 'This little booklet will be deeply useful for parents. They will find comfort in seeing that some of the puzzling things their children do can be explained and made acceptable and educationally worthwhile once understood.'

'They will be inspired by the beautifully presented and well-chosen photographs, which make tangible important aspects of learning. The booklet will help both parents and practitioners to work and observe together, identifying key aspects in developing learning from babies and toddlers to children about to go to primary school.'

The guide will be distributed free to early years settings in Suffolk and can be bought (priced £3.50) from the author by emailing: sramlouis@aol.com.



IN RESPONSE

The response to the evening was immediate. The next day, parents posted a couple of photographs on the playgroup's Facebook page, showing examples of schematic behaviour. Alongside, they commented that without the workshop, they would have failed to recognise the importance of what their child was doing, and learning.

Now that the parents are actively encouraging and supporting their children's schematic behaviour, we have seen the children grow in confidence.

Unfortunately, only nine parents attended the forum, though some who were unable to attend the first evening have now expressed an interest in attending the next. Another suggestion has been to run the evening termly, so that we can reach every intake of children. We asked parental permission to record the first event, so we may also make the video available to parents who find it hard to attend evening events. Given the importance of schemas, it's a message we want to pass on to everyone. ■

Helen Petrie is a supervisor of St Winefride's Playgroup in Holywell, Flintshire