

Chaos theory

Physical exuberance needs to be encouraged, not limited, in two-year-olds, says *Julia Manning-Morton*

Physicality is at the centre of two-year-olds' experiences; they are 'on the go', 'into everything' and express themselves and communicate through physical action as much, if not more, than through verbal language.

In a social culture that sets great store by language and rational thought and behaviour such as ours, each of these characteristics mean that a two-year-old's physical behaviours can be interpreted negatively and seen as undesirable by adults who are not experienced or knowledgeable about this age group.

The development of many physical accomplishments means that adult expectations of a two-year-old's ability to regulate their physical actions are raised. Neuromuscular control, which gradually progresses from the head downwards (cephalocaudal development) and from the trunk outwards to fingertips and toes (proximodistal development), develops rapidly in the first two years. However, practitioners should remember that physical skills are still being refined in the third year of life and beyond.

This means that regulating the heaviness of a pat given to a dog or the direction of a ball is not always possible and, of course, levels of physical control will vary hugely between individual children and between children who are just two and those who are nearly three.

For most two-year-olds, running, climbing, rolling and jumping is not just what they want to do but what they need to do.

If the space, resources and play opportunities in a setting are too limited or tame, the inventive two-year-old will find a way to make them more exciting.

A child climbing on tables and chairs is a common example of this. But rather than repeating 'please get down' (frustrating for practitioners and children), practitioners will enhance the provision if they ask, 'What challenges are the children looking for and how can I provide this safely?'

Providing the space, time and resources for movement play or rough and tumble play will facilitate two-year-olds' learning about their own strength and how to exercise control, understanding social boundaries and how to regulate their impulses and develop empathy.

Ample opportunity for physical play is imperative, because without a strong movement vocabulary children may have limited expressive ability and inappropriate reactions to the environment.

Physical play helps twos learn how to exercise control and understand social boundaries



● *Nursery World's* conference on 2 July – Two-Year-Olds: The Drive For High-Quality Provision, www.two-year-olds-conference.com/566302



GROUP ACTIVITIES

Similarly, group activities where two-year-olds are expected to sit still should be avoided as this undermines their efforts to master control of their bodies; being able to be still is the peak of physical development only achieved through movement. So, group story and song times must cater for children's need to move and handle props. Boredom or excitement during group times can lead to the imitation of rowdy or (to the adult) disruptive behaviour.

For example, while singing Five Little Ducks one two-year-old found wagging his arms and repeating 'Quack-quack' hilarious, giggling and falling over on the floor. Of course, the other children quickly imitated him, rolling about and kicking their legs in the air.

The practitioner realised that this group contagion was indicative of the children's greater interest in each other and moving about, so she got down on her hands and knees and encouraged the children to crawl around being different animals and 'talking' to each other using animal noises.

She was able to take this creative approach because she understood that the children's behaviour was not

PHOTOS: ISTOCK



a personal affront to her but a result of their exuberance. Her creative response not only made their group time enjoyable – it also encouraged relevant physical and social learning.

CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION?

When my son was two years old, a friend bought him a t-shirt printed with the slogan ‘Chaos, panic, disorder... my work here is done!’ It is a sentiment that reveals a widely held stereotype of two-year-olds and the impact they have on the people and world around them. But of course, as with all stereotypes, it is exaggerated and inaccurate, showing a huge lack of understanding about how two-year-olds learn through moving, doing and handling.

It is true, however, that with their fondness for mobility the play of two-year-olds involves much moving around of themselves and objects, which without appropriate adult involvement might lead to chaos and disorder (and in some adults, panic). But if observed closely, it can be seen that a two-year-old who might be thought of as ‘flitting’ and not concentrating as they move about may in fact be pursuing a particular idea or exploring a particular schema such as transporting or trajectory.

Also, as both Piaget (1952) and Gopnik et al (1999) have described, two-year-olds are like researchers or little scientists: always investigating and wanting hands-on experience and proof of what they are told and what they see. This insatiable curiosity about how things work means repeatedly taking things apart before knowing how to put them back together (a bit like adults who like tinkering with car engines). This can sometimes be misinterpreted as destructiveness where it might in fact



be a fascination with ordering, categorisation or cause and effect.

Cause and effect relationships are a focal point for two-year-olds’ learning about things and relationships, but practitioners should remember that physical capabilities are usually far in advance of a two-year-old’s ability to think about the potential consequences of their behaviour, and also their capacity to understand and remember the many rules they encounter in an early years setting and at home.

So a child who has been told not to keep pressing down the toaster lever may be so preoccupied by the link between the lever and the toast popping up that they will miss the point that the adult wants them to stop.

As well as exploring objects, two-year-olds are interested in themselves and what their bodies can do and produce. This may include playing with the mucus from their noses or looking for where their urine comes from – behaviours that can provoke strong negative responses in adults and be seen as very antisocial. But the extent to which a child retains a sense of pride in their physical self depends largely on whether the parent or practitioner treats this natural curiosity with horror or a calm matter-of-fact response.

PHYSICAL EXPRESSION AND COMMUNICATION

Two-year-olds also use their bodies to express their emotions. Earlier in this series we discussed how emotions such as fear and anger trigger the fight or flight response, so children who are often running around

MORE INFORMATION

- *Exploring Well-Being in the Early Years* edited by J Manning-Morton (2014)
- *How Babies Think* by A Gopnik, A Meltzoff and P Kuhl (1999)
- *Key Times: a framework for developing high-quality provision for children from birth to three years* by J Manning-Morton and M Thorp (2006)
- *Key Times for Play: the first three years* by J Manning-Morton and M Thorp (2003)
- *The Origin of Intelligence in Children* by J Piaget (1952)
- *Two Year Olds in Early Years Settings: journeys of discovery* by J Manning-Morton and M Thorp (2015)

manically or hitting out will be communicating possible feelings of anger, frustration, boredom or anxiety through their physical behaviour.

Equally, children who are running off or clinging to their key person will be communicating how confident or insecure they are feeling at that particular time. Spitting is very effective in rejecting people and may arise from a child’s feelings of rejection and abandonment and biting may give the biter temporary relief from feelings of stress, anger and frustration.

Physical behaviours such as these understandably provoke strong responses in adults. In a Key Times training exercise that I developed (see ‘More information’ column), practitioners are asked to identify the behaviours in children they find particularly difficult, how they make them feel and how they might want to respond if they weren’t professionals. They consistently identify that the feelings provoked in them are likely to be very similar feelings to those the child experienced that led to the behaviour in the first place.

So practitioners need to consider carefully their understanding of the triggers for two-year-olds’ behaviours and their responses to them. A behaviourist approach of naughty steps, thinking time, time-out chairs or sticker charts does not help children to sufficiently understand their feelings and behaviours. Neither does such an approach consider the kind of distressing early experiences that may be triggering a child’s behaviour, which are not forgotten but stored in their bodies and unconscious minds. Practitioners also need to consider that all behaviour has meaning and is communicating something about the child’s state of mind, communications that practitioners need to listen to with their eyes as well as their ears.

PHYSICAL WELL-BEING

Children’s behaviour is also adversely affected by a lack of physical well-being. Being hungry, tired, cold, hot, sick or hurt or feeling discomfort can cause them to be irritable, unco-operative and sometimes to lose control and act aggressively.

Very young children may not realise what the source of their unhappiness is or be able to express their ill-being in words. It is up to the practitioner to think about what might be causing negative behaviour and address children’s comfort needs promptly and with empathy. ■