

Children as partners

Cooperative play is an important part of children's learning. We explain why and how you can encourage it in your setting.

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Educators expect children to work cooperatively together. Their observations of children often record times when children share, take turns, and play well with others. Although this article focuses on children working cooperatively with others, it's important to remember that children need time and space to be on their own. With time and space on their own children are in control of themselves, the resources that they use and the toys that they play with. On their own children learn to make decisions for themselves, and are responsible for their own actions. They have a sense of freedom.

It is no surprise then that one of the indicators of quality play, identified by Bruce, is that 'children play on their own'. While being on their own is important to children, Bruce also includes 'playing together' as another indicator of quality play. Children like to play together. They have a strong interest in each other from an early age. It is common to see babies transfixed when they meet other babies; they watch them, try to reach out to them, touch them and interact. Children continue to spontaneously interact with each other as they get older. They are, naturally inclusive. Educators can help children develop as partners.

Everyday Stories is a study that identifies three components of good practice relating to children's relationships with each other. Although the study involved babies and young children from six-31 months, the components are worth considering for older children too.

Adults should:

1. Pay attention to children's give and take games by accepting and encouraging them
2. Recognise children's developing friendships with one another
3. Support children with shared interests and patterns of play ensuring time to play together

In addition to these three components, I have added a fourth. It is important that children see adults:

4. Modelling cooperation and working in partnership together.

1. Pay attention and praise

- When children voluntarily respond to one another, it is important that adults praise them.
- Songs and action games that involve copying and turn-taking can help support the natural give and take needed for communicating and cooperating together. Children can take part in these as pairs, in whole and small groups.

'A new girl had joined the nursery. Katie, one of the four year olds, gently rolled a ball at her. She rolled it back and a routine began. The nursery teacher sat nearby and asked if she could join in the game. They all continued, smiling and laughing.'

2. Friends together

- Children's newly developed friendships can be encouraged by making arrangements for them to play together, be near each other and spend time together whenever they choose.
- Adults should remember that children may like to be with different children for different types of activity.
- Rigid and regular groupings and 'same-place-each-day' approaches are not helpful.

'The children in a nursery were directed to activities. Andy wanted to play at the water tray with Sven. There was no space for him. Andy was told to play in the home corner on the other side of the room. He did not move, despite many directives to go. Instead he stood silently near the water tray, waiting for a space and watching his friend.'

Eventually, Andy's turn came.. Both boys became animated and engaged. They played cooperatively as they joined pipes, tubes and bottles to set up a water trail. The nursery key worker admired their work and said, 'My goodness, you two have worked well together. I can see now why you were so keen wait, Andy. I'll make a note that you want to be together in future, especially if its water-tray play.'

3. Share interests

- Knowing what interests children is important.
- Consulting with parents and key carers directly and through communication books provides useful information.
- Home visits may be possible prior to joining a nursery or school.
- Ongoing observation of the children, and listening to them in the widest sense, is a crucial aspect of the role of all those who work with children.
- Talking with children individually, and in small groups, about their likes, dislikes and activities beyond the setting is very rewarding. The children may sometimes reveal these in conversation, through their play, drawings, paintings, what they make, and the ways they dance or sing as well as in many other ways.

'A reception teacher noticed that three boys regularly chose to play on a road-map-carpet with miniature cars. The teacher extended their interest by arranging times to visit to the staff cars in the car park, lifting the bonnets so that children could see the engine and allowing them to sit in the driver's seat. She acknowledged their shared interest and helped deepen their relationships. Other children were interested too and the friendships extended beyond the original three players.'

4. Working together

- Children need to see adults cooperating and working in partnership.
- In front of children, staff can discuss matters together, laugh together, plan together, help each other with tasks, share resources, eat and take tea together, even disagree at times, while remaining friends.
- Discussions and regular ongoing links with parents provide opportunities for children to see partnership in action.

- Involving other members of the community as guests in the setting requires give and take, making organisational changes and working together.

- Children can be involved in planning how things might need to change to accommodate visitors and new children.

'The children are allowed to invite someone to tea in the home corner. They have to cooperate as a whole group to allow the special event to take place on a regular basis for individuals. Each host has to consider the needs of their guest

and cooperate with them in a very real way during the visit. Vijay chooses chocolate biscuits and tea for his mum. Kim chooses Rich Tea biscuits for her friend Sara.'

Adults play an important role helping children understand

- why partnership and cooperation is important,
- what partnership and cooperation looks like
- how it feels to be cooperative and a partner.

Further information

Learning through Play: babies, toddlers and the foundation years by Tina Bruce (Hodder and Stoughton)

The Kindness of Children by Vivian Gussin Paley (Harvard University Press)

Everyday Stories available from The National Children's Bureau visit www.ncb.org.uk/features/eds

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