

Rocking and Rolling: Empowering Infants' and Toddlers' Learning Through Scaffolding

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Ms. Tonya plays peek-a-boo with Anthony, 4 months old. She holds a blanket in front of her face, peeks out over the top of it, and says, “Peek-a-boo!” Anthony laughs. After she does this a few times, she notices that Anthony’s attention has waned. The next time she puts the blanket up, she moves it to the side of her face and peeks out from a different place. Anthony looks surprised and laughs, reengaged.

Shayla, 11 months old, lets go of the cart she is pushing and stands alone. Her teacher, Mr. Peter, sitting nearby, says, “Hi, Shayla!” He reaches his hand toward her, and she takes one step, then another, then falls down. Shayla’s eyes open wide, and Mr. Peter says, “Boom, you fell down, but you’re okay. Do you want to try again?” Shayla reaches up her arms and Mr. Peter helps her stand up. He holds her hands while she steadies herself, then gives her two small toys to hold so that she balances on her own. He says, “Okay, Shayla, can you walk to me?” Holding tightly to the two toys, she takes three steps and reaches Mr. Peter right before she falls down. “You did it!” Mr. Peter exclaims.

Twenty-two-month-old Aydin has just arrived at Ms. Evelyn's family child care home. Ms. Evelyn has three other toddlers close to Aydin's age. Recently, she has noticed that Aydin knows the color yellow. She places several yellow objects on a small table, along with a few red objects. Aydin immediately goes to the table and picks up a yellow block, saying, "Lellow!" Ms. Evelyn says, "Yes, that's a yellow block. Can you find something else yellow?" Aydin looks back at the table and picks up a yellow toy car. He brings it to Ms. Evelyn, saying, "Lellow!"

Each of these scenarios shows skilled teachers setting up environments and facilitating infants' and toddlers' development and learning. Their process is called *scaffolding*. Scaffolding is how adults support children's development and learning by offering just the right help at just the right time in just the right way. Scaffolding is typically demonstrated with older children, yet adults' natural interactions with infants and toddlers are scaffolding learning all the time. Understanding the process can help educators be more intentional in their interactions. In addition, by examining their beliefs, teachers can become more sensitive to the many opportunities to scaffold presented in everyday interactions.

Scaffolding allows children to solve a problem or carry out a task that is beyond their current abilities. It is a bridge teachers create to connect existing knowledge to new knowledge and understanding. Successful scaffolding happens in what Lev Vygotsky (1978), a pioneering psychologist, coined the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). The ZPD is the difference between what a person can do and learn on his own, and what he can do and learn with the help of someone who is more experienced. As a result, scaffolding is collaborative in nature. Teachers need to join infants and toddlers in play and build from there. Scaffolding requires several considerations: understanding children's overall development; understanding the ways individual children approach learning; establishing realistic learning objectives; and matching strategies to each child's current interests, knowledge, and skills.

For example, in the peek-a-boo scenario, Ms. Tonya sensitively models how to play, but she also adjusts her play to match Anthony's interest and attention. By slightly changing the game, she reengages Anthony and holds his attention a little longer. This type of play not only increases learning, but also encourages active participation in a game.

One in-depth study of three teachers demonstrated the many potential benefits of teachers scaffolding development by joining infants' play in sensitive and responsive ways (Jung & Recchia 2013). These teachers were able to empower and enhance the self-motivation of the infants in their care. In the earlier scenarios, each teacher joined a child's play and extended learning through careful observation, supportive environments, and active engagement. These strategies facilitated the children's abilities to learn a little more than what they might have learned on their own.

Careful and intentional observing enabled the teachers to sensitively individualize their scaffolding to meet each infant's needs.

How teachers view infants may influence how they approach scaffolding. The three teachers who participated in the in-depth study (Jung & Recchia 2013) saw infants as innately motivated and competent. They carefully observed the babies' individual temperaments—how they liked to play; when they gave up; in what ways they liked to receive teacher support; how responsive and sensitive they were to teacher actions; how enthusiastic they were in their play; and to what degree they maintained their focus in play. This careful and intentional observing enabled the teachers to sensitively individualize their scaffolding to meet each infant's needs.

We see similar observations and responsiveness in the opening scenarios. Anthony maintained his attention and joint play because Ms. Tonya slightly changed where she peeked out from behind the blanket. Shayla took a few more steps because Mr. Peter responded sensitively to her attempts to walk by providing props (toys) that helped her balance. And Ms. Evelyn prepared her environment based on her previous experiences with Aydin's interest in the color yellow. Each teacher also allowed the children enough space to pursue their interests through play and supported learning by being present and actively engaged.

Reaffirming the large research base on scaffolding (see, for example, Head Start 2017), the three-teacher study (Jung & Recchia 2013) highlights how observing and reflecting help teachers to better understand each infant's preferences, culture, and what support they may need to move forward. Providing that support in just the right context—or, to use Vygotsky's term, within each infant's zone of proximal development—leads to more effective scaffolding. Some of the effective strategies the researchers identified include:

- Modeling for children
- Encouraging children in verbal and nonverbal ways
- Following the child's lead

- Physical intervention, such as what Mr. Peter did to help stabilize Shayla in her attempts to walk
- Offering and accepting choices
- Joining in a child's play as a partner while still allowing the child to lead

Think about it

- How have you seen young children learn through play?
- What do you believe about infants' and toddlers' abilities to learn through play?
- How might your beliefs influence how you set the stage for young children's learning?
- How have you seen an infant's temperament influence her learning?

Try it

- Pick a child to watch during free play.
 - What do you think the child is trying to learn through play?
 - What temperament characteristics do you see the child displaying?
 - What do you see as your role in supporting the child's learning?
 - What strategies do you want to use to support that learning?
- Take turns observing fellow teachers supporting children's learning. Document which scaffolding strategies they use.

Teachers of infants and toddlers shape the curriculum by carefully setting up the environment and by watching and wondering about children's current interests and abilities. They act on those observations by extending each child's learning through

playful interactions and scaffolding. In this way, teachers set the stage for children's future learning and success!

Note: The term "teacher(s)" is used to describe the adult working with the child in the setting.

References

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