

Tip sheet: Learning Through Play

Heuristic Play with Toddlers

What is heuristic play?

Heuristic play describes the activity of babies and young children as they explore objects from the real world. The practitioner sets out an environment with a rich range of resources, and supports and enables young children to discover, explore and experiment.

Heuristic play in action

Allocating a set time for heuristic play works well, usually an hour once or twice a week, which includes time to set up areas for children to explore and time to tidy up at the end. The practitioner arranges a large selection of materials that can be used together in an attractive and enticing way. While a purpose is in mind (e.g. stacking, posting, rolling), children are free to explore and experiment with the materials as they would like to. The practitioner observes the level of involvement of the children. When they appear to have explored the materials to their potential and signal that they are ready to move on, it is time to start clearing up. Following the session, tidying up is as enjoyable an activity as playing is, when the children are involved in collecting and putting the materials back into the correct bags. Each practitioner shows an object to the children and gestures that it should be put into the open bag. As each item is put in, the adult can check that it is in good order, and remove any that show signs of wear and tear.



Invitation to make sounds

Wooden and metal spoons, containers to bang and shake



Invitation to thread
Bracelets, hoops, kitchen
roll holder

Heuristic play is an approach and there is no one right way to do it. People in different settings will have their own ideas and collect their own materials.

The role of the adult

During the session, practitioners closely observe each child and how they are exploring the material, without interrupting or guiding their explorations. The observations are then used to inform future play sessions for individual children. The practitioner does not encourage or suggest, praise or direct what the children should do. Practitioners observe the children while they are using the materials to ensure that the child is safe and using the materials safely. The

only exception to this is if a child begins to throw things or disturb others. In that case, the best approach is to offer the child some objects and encourage them to use them by modelling ideas.

Heuristic play materials

Up to 15 drawstring bags containing open-ended materials are suggested as a good selection to begin with. Each bag should be labelled and contain up to 50 objects as children are not yet ready to share. A row of hooks is needed to hang up the objects when not in use or, where heuristic materials are shared between rooms, a trolley could be a good place to store the materials, making it easy to wheel the materials from one room to another.

Please note: The selection and availability of open-ended materials should always take account of the ages, stages and individual characteristics of the children attending the service and the staffing arrangements present in the service. A thorough risk assessment should be undertaken before introducing new materials and/or practices taking into account the above considerations. The following list contains some suggestions of open-ended materials that can be used as part of a heuristic play session.



Invitation to post
Shoe boxes with slits and holes to post bottle lids

<p>Stacking Boxes, tins with lids, cotton reels, cones, coasters, pieces of wood etc.</p>	<p>Posting A box with a small slit in the top, tubes, pegs, shells, stones etc.</p>
<p>Balancing Dolly pegs to peg around a box or a stainless steel bowl etc.</p>	<p>Threading Curtain rings, paper towel holder, cup tree, bangles/bracelets, large beads etc.</p>
<p>Rolling Balls of different sizes and textures, tubes, a ramp made from a cardboard box, cones, pompoms, wooden door knob, cone shaped shells etc.</p>	<p>Pattern making Shells, stones, pine cones, leaves etc.</p>
<p>Matching Containers and lids, pairs of objects etc.</p>	<p>Collecting Baskets with handles, large jars, bags, containers with small and large openings etc.</p>
<p>Nesting Baskets that fit inside one another etc.</p>	<p>Making noise Metal objects, small objects to put in jars and be shaken, a wooden stick for banging etc.</p>

Heuristic Play and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Heuristic play encourages children to use their senses and to explore and work with the objects and materials available. They are motivated to choose the ideas that they want to investigate and learn in an active, hands-on way. Their progression in learning is supported through exploration. Heuristic play is meaningful for children when practitioners are tuned in and observe the way they interact with the materials and provide further opportunities for the children to continue to explore and build on their ideas.

Well Being

Aim 2 LG 3

Aim 4 LGs 1 & 4

Exploring and Thinking

Aim 1 LGs 4 & 6

Identity and Belonging

Aim 4 LGs 3 & 4

Communicating

Aim 1 LG 6

References & Resources: Jackson, S. Forbes, R. (2014) *People Under Three: Play, work and learning in a childcare setting 3rd Edition*. Routledge.