

BUILDING ON CHILDREN'S INTERESTS

Children show unique interests and strengths at an early age. The possibilities expand as children gain new skills and understandings. Some examples follow:

- A young baby may demonstrate particular interest in sounds, or in social contact, interest that goes beyond that shown by all babies.
- An older baby may show fascination with dropping, releasing and throwing, or develop a condition described as “container madness”, where the name of the game is fitting things into containers. This may even include oneself – that is, fitting oneself into boxes and other small spaces.
- Toddlers may demonstrate passions for moving around in space, re-organising (or disorganising!) space by moving furniture and equipment.
- Toddlers and older pre-school aged children may develop particular interests in types of experiences, for example moving to music, painting, climbing, or block building. In addition, it is not uncommon for them to develop interests in particular objects around them, for example vehicles, animals, water, or plants for instance.

The list could go on and on. Sometimes these interests are short term; sometimes they are lifelong.

Whether the interest is a predictable one for the age group or a rather unusual one unique to the individual child, there are many reasons for nurturing it.

- An individual interest, when supported, expands our horizons. It opens the door to new experiences, new information, new skills. It leads to new possibilities and helps the child to appreciate the power and joy of learning, of going into new territory. Pursuing an interest can encourage creativity, experimentation, exploration, and reasonable risk taking.
- It helps the child and others to see her- or himself as an individual. It is in fact our interests and passions that contribute to our uniqueness, that define us.
- When others notice and support a child's interests it helps the child see him-or herself as “effective”, as someone who can make a difference, have an impact.
- Unique interests are a testimony to diversity, and when children are in situations where individual interests are encouraged, they develop a sense of the richness of diversity.
- Nurturing and valuing unique talents, interests and strengths can contribute significantly to the well-being of others and the entire community. Children learn the value of collaboration and working together with each person making a unique contribution.

Knowledge of child development and what to expect at different ages is at the core of working well with young children. However, if we focus too narrowly we may miss what they are really thinking and doing and creating and saying, and therefore to how we can best support their learning. In other words, the lens of child development, just like any other single lens, has the capacity to constrain our vision.

When you think of what is wonderful, what is exciting, what is the essence of people you know well, whether children or adults, you probably do not think in terms of the information that is contained in human development texts, that is, the person's emotional, cognitive, social, large and small motor developmental status. What makes a person rich, colourful, unique and special is their interests, passions, and personal style.

A child is so much more than a collection of developmental milestones, so much richer than the sum of their achievements in conventional developmental areas. We limit the complexity, colour and richness of children when we think of them only in terms of developmental status, when we fail to really see and hear them as unique individuals with unique interests and talents.

We must be sure that we don't allow any particular way of seeing children obstruct our view of the person that is the child – the whole child, to use that old-fashioned term. Knowing about development is very useful for child rearing, but that knowledge must reveal rather than obscure the richness of the child's humanness.

After all, a parent's role is a combination of supporting the unfolding of the person whom that child is and shaping the person that the child becomes.

ANNE STONEHOUSE