



National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program



Interest-based learning

'Each child's current knowledge, strengths, ideas, culture, abilities and interests are the foundation of the program.' *National Quality Standard, Element 1.1.2* (ACECQA, 2020, p. 90)

'Educators are responsive to all children's strengths, abilities and interests.' *Early Years Learning Framework* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16)

We know that children learn best when they are interested and engaged. Using children's interests as the basis for our curriculum decision making helps to ensure that learning is not only interesting but also meaningful and relevant to children. As the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) notes, being responsive to children's strengths, abilities and interests helps to 'ensure motivation and engagement in learning' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16).

Sometimes however, we place too much emphasis on children's interests at the expense of our own role as educators. Children's interests are an important part of our work, but not everything we do can or should be based on these. Focusing on children's interests should not lead to the assumption that children are best placed to make all the decisions about what we do, or to see ourselves as passive observers of children's learning. Our role is critical in supporting children's thinking and learning. Without educator involvement and planning, effective learning is less likely to happen. Effective interest-based programs involve more than simply allowing children to do as they wish. In fact they usually involve as much planning and forethought as any other form of program.

As Elizabeth Jones (Jones & Nimmo, 1994), an American educator who has written widely on interest-based and emergent curriculum approaches, points out (p. 5):

... curriculum is [a] teacher's responsibility, not children's. People who hear the words emergent curriculum may wrongly assume that everything simply emerges from the children. The children's ideas are an important source of curriculum but only one of many possible sources ...

Similarly, the EYLF notes that children's ideas and interests form 'an important basis for curriculum decision making' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 17). Importantly, the use of *an* rather than *the* highlights that children's interests are only one basis for what we do.

Using interests, not just following them

When considering the balance between adult and child direction, it can help if we think about *using* children's interests rather than just *following* them. When we see ourselves as following children's interests we tend to see children as being in charge of the program, which may lead us to minimise our own role. If, however, we *use* children's interests, then we can see the interest as the starting point for what we do, rather than as the end point. It then becomes our role, in partnership with children, to convert the interest into an effective learning experience, rather than assuming an experience will be worthwhile simply because it is child-chosen or child-directed.

Our focus should be on where an idea leads, rather than its source. A good idea usually becomes an interest, whether it comes from a child, a group of children, a family, an educator or elsewhere. We need not worry that we are interfering with children's creativity or freedom of choice by introducing potential areas of interest. Children are not likely to think about the source of an idea. If it interests them, they will take it and make it their own.



Expanding interests

Children can only be interested in what they already know about. If our focus is only on what children are already interested in, we will have a limited pool of ideas and interests to draw on. This limited pool will interfere with creating a rich and engaging program, in collaboration with children and families. While our curriculum decisions need to respect and involve children, ultimately—as Jones argues—the creation of the curriculum is our responsibility (albeit one that we undertake in partnership with children and families) (Jones & Nimmo, 1994).

Making use of children’s interests to provide engaging and meaningful learning experiences is important, but it is also our role as educators to introduce new ideas and interests. Sometimes these will be things that we know are important for children to learn, but that may never come up as an interest—for example, road safety, sustainability or nutrition. There are many topics that we know children will be interested in once they are introduced to them—cooking or gardening for example. If we wait for children to show interest before introducing topics, we may miss the opportunity to introduce them at all.

Being selective

Using children’s interests effectively requires us to be selective. It is impossible to plan for everyone’s interests at once. Rather than extending every passing interest, we need to develop skills to identify and select interests that are worth extending. In addition, interests are not all equally interesting. Nor do they offer the same possibilities for learning. By thinking carefully about how we respond to each interest, we can ensure that we make the best use of our time and effort and maximise children’s opportunities for meaningful and interesting learning.

Sometimes the best response to an interest is to simply acknowledge it with a comment, a question, or to provide some resources and materials to extend on what is happening. Alternatively we might note it down or file it away in our memory for possible future use. And sometimes it might become the start of a bigger and more involved interest-based project (see *Educator’s story* on page 3).

When selecting interests to follow up in more detail, consider which ones:

- have the most potential to be extended
- might have a wider appeal to other children or to the whole group
- link to other learning opportunities you have offered and consolidate or extend children’s current learning
- link to the EYLF Learning Outcomes.

Your experience and the children’s responses will help you make good decisions about introducing new ideas and possible

interests. A strong interest generates its own momentum and—if you let it—that momentum will take both you and the children in all sorts of interesting directions.



Educator's story

When I think about children's interests I think first about where the learning might go and what I can add. Is the interest just a passing one? Is it something that the children are happy to continue doing on their own? Or is it something more recurring and meaningful; an interest that could grow into something more?

An interest doesn't have to be grand or life changing—something very simple can spark the most amazing ideas.

I remember a group of boys who were fixated on Transformers®. Everything they did, from block building to outdoor play, involved Transformers®. It would have been easy to simply dismiss this as 'boys being boys' or to try to stamp it out. But when we did neither of these things it became an interest that lasted for many months.

It is impossible to follow every interest that arises, so why was this one special? The boys had been playing their game for weeks, but it had seldom progressed beyond knocking over block towers or chasing each other around while pretending to be Transformers®. In many ways these games were becoming a problem. They became increasingly physical and an excuse for excluding children. However it was obvious that the games were important and meaningful to those who were involved.

What was it about Transformers® that interested them? What was it they liked so much?

In the end it was as simple as asking them the question. By talking to the boys I learnt that what they loved were the different powers of each Transformer® and the way that they could change into different objects.

That became our question: What would you transform into?

We started with drawings; we then progressed to making our own moveable models with cardboard and split pins and then used these to create our own stories. We added the Transformers® the children made to block play and created a life-sized model from boxes. The children's enthusiasm and excitement was infectious.

As an educator it became important for me to stay focused and not get too carried away with all of the ideas that were suddenly swirling around us. While I don't want to stifle the children's ideas I have found that the key to successfully guiding an interest-based project is to have a vision of where you might go with it. Without some sort of idea to act as a guide, a project can quickly become so big and sprawling that it is no longer manageable or achievable. At the same time, it is also important to be flexible. It's not always an easy balance, but it's something you get better at as you go along.

I had initially pictured a large human-like robot made from old



boxes. We stuck with box construction but, at the children's insistence, it became a robot that turned into a dog.

While this interest had started with a small group of boys, it became an experience that all of the children took part in. They loved the idea of making their own robots and even those with no knowledge of Transformers® soon received a crash course.

Had I chosen not to do something with this interest it may have proved to be a passing phase; had I rushed in and added posters and toy Transformers® at the start, the whole experience would have been completely different. By becoming actively involved, I was able to challenge the children's ideas and shape them into more meaningful experiences. By taking advantage of the children's interests, I was able to encourage their involvement in areas that they had previously avoided.

As a group the children's play became more constructive, complex and inclusive. The specific learning that resulted was different for every child. For some, the most important aspect of the project was the problem solving and creativity involved in designing and making their own Transformers®. For others it was the communication and social skills that developed as a result of being part of a group. For one child it was the sense of importance and self-esteem as he came to be seen as the Transformer 'expert'.

The children made their own meaning of the experience with my guidance. For me this is the most important thing about using children's interests. It is not about just adding a few resources and then walking away, but rather becoming actively involved. Don't be afraid to be part of an interest. With the right interest and with the time and resources to explore it properly, children will amaze you. But don't forget that it is often an educator's careful support that makes the difference and allows the children to take an interest from the ordinary to the extraordinary.



Luke Touhill
Early childhood consultant and writer

Biography

Luke Touhill is an early childhood consultant and writer. He has worked in early childhood for 20 years as a teacher, director, manager and trainer. As a teacher his interests include project-based learning and the integration of 'real' experiences such as cooking, woodworking and gardening, into early childhood programs.

Coordinating Editor

Anne Stonehouse lives in Melbourne and is a consultant in early childhood. She was a member of the consortium that developed the national *Early Years Learning Framework*.

References

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