



Schema Theory

'A schema is a pattern of repeated behaviour into which experiences are assimilated and gradually co-ordinated. Co-ordinations lead to a higher and more powerful schema.' Chris Athey

At Rachel McMillan we observe children carefully to identify how they learn and make sense of their world. If you observe a child you can often notice their preoccupations and how children interact with their environment. The way they do this can get repeated in lots of different things they do. These 'patterns' of play are often referred to as schemas. They were first identified by Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and brought to a more accessible and popular format by Chris Athey (1924-2011) and have been heavily researched to show how 'feeding' a schema supports learning and development.

There are lots of different types of schema that are displayed in children's behaviour. Here are two common examples:

Trajectory - A child who likes to bang, throw, drop things from a height, run and build towers (any or all of these things) may be said to have a trajectory schema. This means the child has an interest in how objects and people move (often in lines) and is helping create a mathematical spatial awareness.

Rotational - A child who has an interest in things which turn, such as taps, keys, wind up toys, enjoys exploring wheels, and runs round and round may be said to have a rotational schema. This theme often runs through all aspects of a child's learning and play and supports their sensory motor development and balance.

Adults can support a child through understanding their schema and scaffold their learning by providing opportunities to extend their thinking as they get older, for example, creating a construction with moving parts (rotational) or introducing a goal to kick or throw a ball towards (trajectory). Sometimes the preoccupations of children who are driven by their schemas can be

frustrating for adults, but once we understand what is going on it is easier to support and provide for them.

'Children often have favourite ways of playing. Sometimes they seem to need to do things the same way again and again. Underlying the ways in which they play are their schemas ... the 'mental framework' of children's thinking.' PEEP

A useful book full of ideas in how to support schemas:

Again! Again! : Understanding schemas in young children by Stella Louis, Clare Beswick, Liz Magrow, Lisa Hayes (2008)

Understanding schemas in young children: Again, Again! by Stella Louis, Clare Beswick and Sally Featherstone (2013)

Young children learning through schemas: deepening the dialogue about learning in the home and in the nursery by Katey Mairs, The Pen Green Team and Cath Arnold (2012)