

PLANNING FOR THE EARLY YEARS

Series editor Jennie Lindon

Food and cooking

How to plan learning opportunities that **engage** and **interest** children

By **Jenny Barber**

BIRTH
TO
FIVE

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Planning to make a difference for children



A child-friendly approach to planning

Young children benefit from reflective adults who plan ahead on the basis of knowing those children: their current interests and abilities, but also what they are keen to puzzle out and learn. Each title in this series of 'Planning for the Early Years' offers a specific focus for children's learning, with activities for you to fine-tune for young girls and boys whom you know well. These adult-initiated activities happen within a day or session when children have plenty of time for initiating and organising their own play. Your focus for the activities is short term; plan ahead just enough so that everything is poised to go.

Thoughtful planning ensures that children enjoy a variety of interesting experiences that will stretch their

physical skills, social and communicative abilities, and their knowledge of their own world. Plans that make a difference for young children connect closely with their current ability and understanding, yet offer a comfortable stretch beyond what is currently easy.

Adult-initiated activities build on children's current interests. However, they are also planned because familiar adults have good reasons to expect that this experience will engage the children. Young children cannot ask to do something again, or develop their own version, until they have that first-time experience. The best plans are flexible; there is scope for the children to influence the details and adults can respond to what actually happens.

Planning is a process that involves thinking, discussing, doing and reflecting. Young children become part of this process, showing you their interests and



Babies and younger children begin with an initial visual stimulus, then, as they touch and smell, they are making connections between what their eyes tell them and what their hands feel.

If children are involved in dissolving the jelly cubes and waiting for the jelly to re-set, they are experiencing first hand the change of state of the jelly, as well as cause and effect as the water reacts with the jelly cubes. They can see and feel the similarities and differences between the two solid states of the set jelly and jelly cubes, the texture, density and colour.

Responding to children's and babies' interests

You need to observe and listen to the children to see what is interesting and stimulating to them. How do they react? Verbal utterances or words and facial expression? Do they seek out additional resources themselves? Do they attempt to pile up the jelly into a mound or flatten it out or attempt to make shapes or other constructions with the jelly?

Can the jelly be set in moulds? What could the children find in the setting to use as moulds?

Could the children cut the jelly with scissors? Is there a difference between attempting to cut the set jelly and the jelly cubes? Can they push the jelly through a sieve or mash it using a potato masher?

Put objects in the jelly before it is set, to be uncovered and discovered. Present it to the children on the floor on an old shower curtain, sprinkled with glitter or corn flour.

Time for you to think



How did the children engage with the activity? Were they able to follow through on ideas, could the jelly be extended into other areas of exploration? Was it the sensory and textural experience they enjoyed most or did they prefer experimenting and finding out? Were they most interested in cutting the jelly or push it through a sieve/potato masher? Did that vary for different children? Could you introduce more dissolving and melting experiences, to follow on with experiencing change of state of different substances? Were children making surprising links and connections? What comments did they make about their discoveries? What does this tell you about their understanding and what can you do with this knowledge?

Listening to children and talking with them

With babies and the younger children you could engage in parallel talk, introducing words to describe their actions. With this kind of play the words can beautifully sum up the sound and feel of the jelly on hands, e.g. squidgy, squelchy, squeezey.

Using supportive, thought-provoking statements is an effective way to encourage older children. "The jelly is making a noise as you squeeze it" "It's cold, it's slimy, it's disappearing". You don't want to be intrusive, distracting the thought processes occurring in the children's brains as they play. Remember, sometimes, it is better to say nothing.

Use questions that could lead to discussion, prediction or generate ideas: "How can we get the jelly out of the mould?" "I wonder how we can make a stripy jelly of different colours" "Do you think we could pile the jelly up in a tower?"

If children enjoy having their hands in the jelly, can they clap their hands or hide their hands in it?

Encourage the children to take the lead, discussing their observations and thoughts.