

# Continuous Provision

Personal and  
Thinking Skills

by Claire Hewson

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**Acknowledgements:** The author would like to thank all the staff, children and parents at Needingworth Community Pre-School, Cambridgeshire. Pam Pantazi and the staff and children at Little Hands Nursery, Bourn, Cambridgeshire. With particular thanks to Dawn Gibson, Randall Bowman, Lucas Goldsmith, Anthony Hardisty and Jamie Hewson.

Published by Practical Pre-School Books, A Division of MA Education Ltd, St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, Herne Hill, London, SE24 0PB.

Tel: 020 7738 5454

www.practicalpreschoolbooks.com

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Design: Mary Holmes **fonthillcreative** 01722 717036

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ISBN 978-1-912611-04-1

# Personal skills in Continuous Provision



Adapting behaviour and language during role play.

Continuous provision allows children the freedom to make independent choices, time to practise new skills through exploration and experimentation, as well as rich opportunities for social interaction and alone time. This is the perfect situation for developing children's perseverance, resilience and self-management skills. In this section, we will look at how you can consciously target the development of children's personal skills in your continuous provision. By nurturing this key aspect you help to ensure that children have a better quality of life both now and in the future. People with excellent personal skills are healthier, happier in their relationships, are less likely to feel depressed and isolated, as well as being more successful at school and work.

In order to develop personal skills you need to plan a continuous provision environment that provides opportunities for children to:

- Play by themselves
- Play with other children
- Build relationships with positive adult role models

- Make choices
- Learn challenging new skills
- Engage in role play.

## Why is playing alone important?

Children who play by themselves learn that they can have fun on their own and that they don't always need others in order to feel happy and entertained. This helps them to become more confident, independent and satisfied people, who feel comfortable in a variety of social situations. Adults who are contented in their own company as well as in busy social environments are more likely to feel confident entering a room of strangers without the support of a familiar individual, and that's a great life skill to have.

Playing alone enables children to learn to soothe themselves. Although they know that you are there for them, they learn to look inwards as well as outwards to solve problems. They begin to understand their own emotions so that they can

communicate those feelings to another person when they need to. Solo play is also a calm, relaxing experience that provides healthy downtime from busy social situations. Having the space to breathe means that children are less likely to engage in angry, emotionally impulsive behaviour.

When children play alone they have the peace to organise their thoughts and to make sense of the world around them with limited interruption. In a busy setting 'alone time' is difficult to achieve, but if you see a child playing by themselves don't be too quick to alter the situation unless it is clear that the child would like company or they are spending a disproportionate amount of time by themselves.

### Why is sociable play important too?

Children love to play together. It is how they make friends and learn social rules. To begin with, children's friendships are short-lived and are based upon the shared interest of a particular game or toy. As their play becomes more complex and they have conversations about the rules of games, they learn to negotiate, solve problems, share, take turns, empathise with and help other children. They learn how to manage their emotions when they win and lose and why it is important to play fairly. Through these interactions children gain a sense of moral reasoning which prepares them to function effectively in the adult world.

Children learn that social interactions do not always run smoothly but, with adult support and through their own trial and error, they find strategies to manage challenging situations. They discover that if they scribble over somebody else's picture because they are cross, then there will be negative consequences for everybody. In this way they gradually learn to control their impulses and find more positive solutions in order to feel comfortable and happy within themselves. Children need to be taught that it is okay to have strong feelings, but that these feelings must be expressed with words and not physical violence.

Sociable play helps children to become assertive and less likely to be bullied both now and later on.

With adult help they can practise how to stand up for themselves using an assertive tone and body

language: 'No! I don't like that. Stop it!' Children older than three can be supported to identify a problem and to think of positive solutions that will work for everybody: 'The problem here is that you both want to play with the blue car. Let's think of some ideas to solve the problem'.

Board games provide invaluable opportunities to practise social skills such as communication, patience, sharing, taking turns, following rules and the joy of interacting with others. Children learn how to win kindly whilst enjoying success, to cope with the disappointment of losing, and the importance of playing honestly and fairly.

### How do positive relationships enhance children's personal skills?

The relationship a child has with their key worker is crucial for their learning and development and for their health and wellbeing. Children learn to feel safe and secure through a close attachment with at least one caring person. This also helps them to build the confidence they need to explore their environment.



Relaxing time alone to process thoughts in a busy setting.

Positive relationships are built by:

- Giving children attention, so that they feel secure and accepted. Comforting them when they need it, smiling at them and really enjoying playing with them.
- Listening with genuine interest to children's thoughts, feelings and ideas. They need to know that what they say is important to you.
- Showing empathy. This doesn't mean that you have to agree with them, but that you communicate that you understand how they feel. Children who receive understanding, compassion, kindness and help are more likely to empathise with and help others.
- Helping children to identify and express their feelings in a socially acceptable manner.
- Providing them with strategies to cope with stress such as breathing in quickly and exhaling slowly.
- Modelling and encouraging patience in children so that they take their time and persevere to develop a skill.
- Showing how you take responsibility for your own feelings and actions so that children will do the same: 'Whoops, I made a mistake. I will try that again.'
- Encouraging children to ask for help when they need it by being approachable and talking about times when you have asked for help yourself.
- Helping children to use humour and to look for the positive side of challenges. This encourages perseverance and resilience.

### What are the benefits of children making choices?

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Making choices boosts children's self-esteem. It gives them a feeling of control and a sense of responsibility that helps them to feel valued, confident and independent. However, it is important not to overwhelm children with too many confusing choices or they will struggle to make decisions which will have the reverse effect on their self-esteem. Offer just one or two choices: 'Do you want a banana or an orange for your snack?' Ultimately, children need to know that adults make the most critical decisions because that helps them feel safe.

It is also important for them to understand that sometimes they cannot choose, and must follow rules that are in place for their own safety and well-

being. Give children the confidence to make choices without the presence of an adult by building in plenty of practice. Make choices part of daily routines. At snack time you might ask: 'Would you like milk or water?' At story time: 'Would you like *Winnie the Witch* or *Winnie the Pooh*?'

Children are more likely to persist with an activity, even if that activity becomes challenging, if they have chosen it themselves. They will normally focus upon the activity for a longer period of time if it was their idea in the first place. Therefore, the best way to build children's skills is through their own activity choices.

For example, you might have identified a group of children who are interested in playing with cars and need to develop scissor skills. So, along with the cars, you could provide the resources for those children to cut card to make their own roads. You might have a group of girls who love princesses, but are reluctant to play with the wooden blocks. However, you want to encourage them to choose wooden blocks so that they can develop problem-solving or maths skills. Therefore you could take the princess dolls to the blocks and dress pastel coloured blocks with pretty fabrics.

Broaden children's scope for choice by helping them to see and access all the resources available to them. Are boxes stored at the right level? Are boxes light enough to lift? (Children need to develop core strength so some physical challenge is good as long as it does not deter them from choosing that resource). Are resources unobstructed? Are they labelled clearly so children know what they are? Do resources reflect children's diverse interests, needs and skill levels? Are there plenty of open-ended resources that inspire curiosity? Are there enough resources to go around, particularly for very young children who are just learning to share? Do children help to tidy up so they know exactly where things go and can find them easily next time?

### How does learning new skills impact children's personal development?

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Activities that gently stretch children help them to tolerate healthy levels of stress. They begin to understand the effort that is required to learn new things and to solve problems, which also helps them to deal with normal, everyday frustrations.



Children who have confidence in their own abilities are more equipped to rise to the challenge of learning new things. They are more likely to persevere to solve a problem and to demonstrate resilience. This is because they believe that their efforts will pay off. When their efforts do pay off, they are rewarded with a sense of accomplishment that leads to further achievement.

So, how can we nurture children's confidence as they learn new skills?

Confidence comes from a caring environment in which children feel safe and secure. Small babies learn that when they cry their parents respond to them. In this way, they discover that they can control their environment and that somebody responds to their needs. As they grow up, this sense of security and trust enables them to feel safe to explore their environment. The enjoyment they gain from these explorations motivates them to master the tasks that they encounter and to develop a 'can do' attitude. As well as providing a nurturing environment you can help children to build confidence in learning new skills by:

- Encouraging children to keep trying even when a task is frustrating.
- Praising effort.
- Helping them to see that success is born out of mistakes.
- Focusing on their strengths and not their limitations.
- Planning activities that build on children's strengths motivate them to develop their interests, to feel confident and to achieve.
- Setting children up for success.
- Encouraging them to complete tasks a step at a time.

**Overleaf you will find two festival-themed continuous provision activities.**

These two examples show how you can plan a spread of activities that offer the chance for children to play across different personal environments. Next to each activity, is an example of a personal skill that you might observe as you engage with children or watch them as they play.



Having the confidence to try a new skill.

enable a teacher to provide scaffolding for students beginning to build their own understandings’.

By showing that you have an enquiring mind you foster the same inquisitiveness in children. ‘I wonder...’ questions are a useful modelling tool that encourage children to consider different possibilities. Children need to be given plenty of time to ponder these questions before speaking.

- I wonder what would happen if...?
- I wonder why it didn’t work this time?
- I wonder what else we could try?
- I wonder how we could make...?
- I wonder what we will see...?
- I wonder what we should take when we go to...?

### Case Study

At Little Hands Nursery children were encouraged to think ‘What else is possible?’ when engaged in imaginative play. The practitioner pointed to a tarpaulin shelter and asked ‘What is in there today?’ Lucy responded, ‘A bear!’ The practitioner asked: ‘What kind of a bear?’ and received the response that it was a scary bear. She continued to encourage children to explore possibilities by asking questions and responding to their ideas as she played with them: ‘What does the bear want?’ ‘What else do you think the bear wants?’ ‘I wonder what will happen if we chase the bear?’ ‘You think we should hide? Where are we going to hide?’ ‘What if there isn’t enough room for all of us?’

### Make connections between ideas

Nancy Andreasen, Chair of Psychiatry at the University of Iowa, says that ‘Creative people are better at recognising relationships, making associations and connections, and seeing things in an original way... seeing things that others cannot see.’

Children think of creative ideas by drawing upon what they already know. In the section Information Processing, we talked about how our brains generate meaning by searching for patterns and relationships between pieces of information. If a child is building an aeroplane from balsa wood, that child will draw

upon a knowledge of planes as well as all the practical skills needed to cut and join pieces of wood. So, in your continuous provision when you provide resources for children to, for example, build a model with balsa wood, you will ensure that they have the necessary skills to draw upon first.

Ellen Galinsky, *Mind in the Making: The seven essential life skills every child needs* (2010) identified that children can transform what they already know into something new. For instance, they might take a game like Snakes and Ladders and then alter the connections to make a game based on Snakes and Ladders with different pictures or different rules.

When children play without adult intervention they can often be observed experimenting and making up new game rules in this way. When engaged in role play, a child might think to put yellow washing-up gloves on their feet to dress up as a duck, because these gloves are a similar colour and shape to ducks’ feet, and because the child predicts that the gloves will stay in place based on the knowledge that they are made of stretchy rubber.



Practitioner fostering inquisitiveness in children by showing she has an enquiring mind.