

Editorial - Building thinking and problem-solving skills in early childhood

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The focus on brain development over the past decade has generated increased community, political and educational interest in early childhood education. Each new review and report emphasises the importance of the early years in boosting brain development and setting the foundations for later learning.

Research indicates the importance of the early years in long-term development and educational outcomes. Early childhood, in particular the first three years of life, is critical because it is at this time that connections (synapses) are formed between the billions of neurons in our brains. These neural pathways develop in response to verbal stimulation and other experiences.

Rich environments with lots of talk and stimulation help a child's brain to develop connections, and the richness of these experiences affect the strength of these connections. When children have limited experiences connections don't form as well, or for as long. Limited experiences in the early years, especially early language and problem-solving experiences, mean less permanent connections in the brain.

In this issue of Every Child we highlight the importance of the critical periods when we can maximise children's development. Our lead writers focus on creating the right experiences at the right times, and supporting children to be good thinkers and problem-solvers. Age-appropriate planning and decision-making paves the way for children's academic success. Clear thinking also promotes social skills and helps children manage their own emotions. It is never too early to help children recognise problems, clarify goals, plan strategies of attack and find solutions.

Intensive, integrated language, vocabulary and literacy experiences—talking, questioning, responding, reading and telling stories—should form the core of early learning programs that aim to boost thinking. Spending time each day talking and promoting early literacy skills with children is crucial.

We can also help stimulate thinking and problem-solving in early childhood settings by providing independent learning opportunities which draw on blocks, art and construction materials, books, computers, music, dramatic props, science, maths, words and letters.

Everyday environmental materials such as cardboard boxes, plastic items and dressing-up clothes generate open-ended experiences that enable children to manipulate materials and make decisions. Activity centres that are carefully scaffolded and guided, but also open-ended, help children to engage with materials and ideas.

Additionally, there are always opportunities for language-use and problem-solving in everyday contexts: at home, out and about, in child care, pre-school and other early childhood settings.

Promoting problem-solving means providing rich experiences and meaningful interactions with children. Talking at children about classroom routines or behavioural issues is not the same as talking with them about ideas and questions.

Responsive parents and educators draw on children's individual social, cognitive and physical experiences to facilitate problem-solving and promote thinking strategies. They harness young children's abilities to use toys and materials in unique and unexpected ways.

Activities that engage children in problem-solving help them to identify and set goals and to develop attention and persistence. They also assist children in developing flexibility in thinking and to begin to recognise and reflect on consequences and relationships of cause and effect. Importantly, success in finding solutions helps children gain confidence in themselves as individuals, social beings and learners.

Problem-solving activities are very helpful in the social arena too: when children play and work in groups they negotiate with friends and learn how to solve interpersonal problems.

Finding the right balance between helping children solve problems and allowing them to explore, investigate and take risks is not always easy. Parents and educators must provide time, space and structure so children can engage in solving problems. They must respect and value children's ideas and support and validate their ways of thinking. Listening and talking to every child and asking open-ended questions is a good starting point.

As we highlight in this issue of Every Child, the key ingredients to building successful thinking and problem-solving skills are well-prepared environments; a range of experiences and structures that enable cooperative play as well as individual activity; and a keen awareness of the active, purposeful role of practitioners in supporting and facilitating learning.

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