

Experiments and Encounters

Inventing Together in Friendship

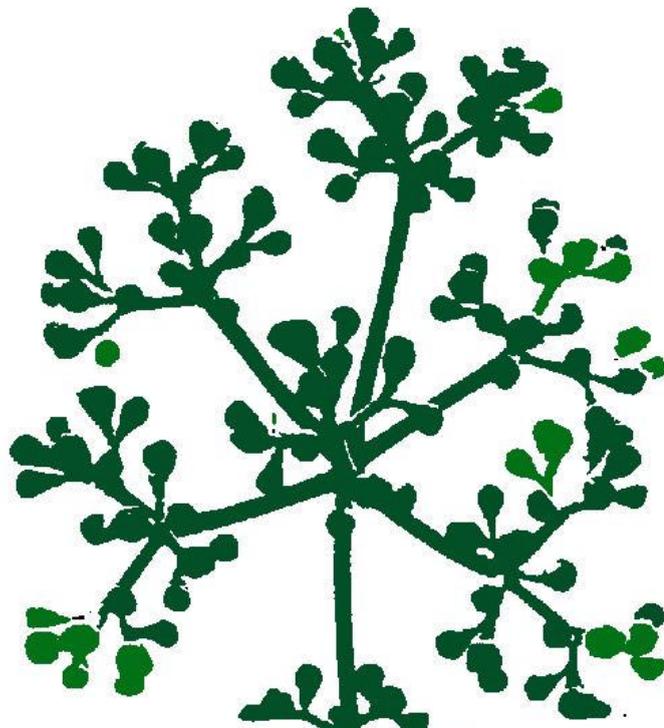
Sightlines Initiative with Childsplay Nursery

Caroline Gransbury

Emma Pace

also published in 'Adventuring in Early Childhood Education'

www.sightlines-initiative.com



Inventing Together in Friendship



An Interest in Construction

Whilst children have a natural inclination to sociability and exchange, co-operation is not always easy to achieve.

How do we offer children meaningful opportunities to work together and collaborate?

Within the pre-school room of Childsplay Nursery several groups and individuals have a growing interest in construction.

George, Matthew, Jake, Ciaran and Jacob often play 'Thunderbirds' and build spaceships and rockets.

George is also interested in understanding how windmills work.

Rami builds racing cars.

Emilia and Ben make 'a game for the cat to get on.'



Materials and opportunities for exploration are introduced. These help the children develop the skills needed to make their ideas real.

Many other children join in with this skills-building exercise and work on new ideas and old ones. They make turtles, rockets, hedgehogs and cameras.

How can we support this group focus on construction whilst allowing space for the children's diverse interests?

A Move to the Garden

Construction activities flow into play in the garden and willow is offered to support ideas.



A new 'living willow' dome (constructed as a weekend project by educators and parents) seems to act as a stimulus in the own willow work.



What are the next steps? There are many distinct interest groups emerging: children interested in construction and mechanics, superheroes, fantasy and reality, role-play and model making.

'Once the ideas began to flow it was difficult to know which ideas to support. It was confusing, there were so many activities and interests emerging.'

To find out which ideas have resonance for the children, the adults show the group a slide presentation of their activities, and invite them to reflect on their work, and decide upon a direction.

The children are asked, 'Where to next?'

George: 'We could build something really big, like this' (he stretches out his arms)

Ana: 'A castle, with stairs and a point at the top.'

Ciaron: 'A rocket.'

Matthew: 'We could go in the rocket to the tree museum right up in the sky. You never go there because it's dangerous and you have to go there with Gordon from Thunderbirds, you have to wear a space pack and an underwater pack.'

Jenna: 'A jewelled path.'

The Builders Club



The children decide on membership of the group without adult direction. They arrive at a general agreement of purpose: to build. It is suggested that the children interested in this idea might form a Builders Club. The children embrace this idea.



Top row
Matthew, Seamus, Emilia

Second row
Charlotte, Ben, Ana

Third row
Ciaron, George



Bottom row
Jack, Rebecca



Co-operation is Learned

*The children in the new club have lots of different ideas.
How can they be helped to choose one?*



The first builders club meeting.

Educator: 'If you are builders what are you going to build?'

Matthew: 'Rocket! I think we should make a rocket'

Ben: 'We can get on it and can blast off in the air'

Ciaron: 'Anyway he'll be scared'

George: 'Why? Because it's fun riding in rockets.'

Ciaron: 'Fast like that wooshh!!!!'

Jack: 'I love rockets'

Educator 'What materials and tools and things will you need for the rocket?'

Jack: 'We need hard hats and jackets to protect us'

George: 'And circles for blasters.'

Ciaron: 'We need to be careful of tools'

George: 'Yes be careful with the saws and don't bang hands with the hammers.'

Matthew: 'We will need bricks.'

George: (to Educator) 'Have you got any willow left at your house?'

Emma: 'Yes we have got some here and we could get some more.'

Ana: 'The rocket has to be made out of willow'

George: 'If we don't know how to make one we can just pretend.'

Educator: 'We can learn.'

The group quickly agree on building a rocket in the garden, made out of willow.

The children are given notepads and pencils for their builders' notes and drawings. They have regular meetings to put forward ideas and discuss progress. This strategy encourages listening, co-operation and negotiation in the group. Perhaps the children's experience of adults lives contributes to their enjoyment of their important meetings.

The builders draw in their notebooks and discuss their ideas.

Ana: (Looking at her drawing) 'How can we get in? (Next she draws a door) That's the door, it must be, that's the handle.'

Ciaron: 'It must have stairs coz it's really big at the top it has stairs to get up it.'

Ana: 'The rocket door has a big handle so big that no one can open it except Ciaron.'

Matthew: 'It could just open by itself – that's what I'm thinking about. Look at my rocket, I know what we need bricks and a point.'

What ideas do the children have about rockets?

How can they share them with each other?

The educators propose that the children draw designs for their construction. Perhaps this will help them organise their thinking?

Making the Rocket



The construction of the rocket is no mean feat. It reveals the capacity of the children to initiate and sustain an idea.

Matthew: 'I'm building a new thunderbirds rocket because the other one is broken.'



Ciaron: 'This is our rocket.'

George: (to Katie) 'Can I come in?'

Katie: 'Yes.'

George: 'I need some string to tie round the rocket.' (Finds some string and begins tying and weaving string around den structure.

Ciaron: (Sitting in den) 'This is really nice.'



A few weeks later Charlotte and Matthew spend time in the rocket.

An educator asked them what they are doing.

Matthew 'Thinking – this is a place for me to think.'

Educator 'Can I come in?'

Matthew 'No, it's ours – just for children.'

One Thing Leads to Another

The builders club leads to the emergence of two more clubs where children come together because of a shared interest, often reinforced by friendship.

The educators are aware that a group of children are not engaged in the construction activities. They discuss how to involve them. Perhaps a Decorators Club will attract the group who have enjoyed decorating the rocket and the dome?



The interested children 'sign up' on the whiteboard, and adopt the same systems as the Builders Club, with meetings and an exchange of ideas.

The Decorators Club



Top row
Jenna, Esmé, Rachel



Middle row
Katie, Charlotte, Rachel



Bottom row
Katia, Imogen, Aphra

Decorations



Jenna: 'Let's clean up, it's a terrible mess in here.'

Imogen spends a great deal of time threading beads onto ribbon. She chooses the colours of the beads very carefully.

Katie works quietly on her own carefully and neatly wrapping ribbon around the hoop.



Katie B, Jenna and Charlotte use the feather dusters to dust and clean up the construction area.

The children quickly become involved in wrapping, threading and tying, making willow decorations for the nursery and the dome.



Esme: 'I think it's a cat.'

Aphra works quietly with focus and competence.





Jenna returns to her idea of constructing a jewelled path. She has been laying out pebbles, stones and shells in the garden: 'I want to make a treasure path outside in our garden.' Jenna's proposal attracts the interest of other children who become The Path-makers Club.

*How can this idea be supported?
What materials can be offered?
Perhaps her preferred materials of stones and shells can be combined with mosaic-making that the children have experience of?*

The Path-Makers



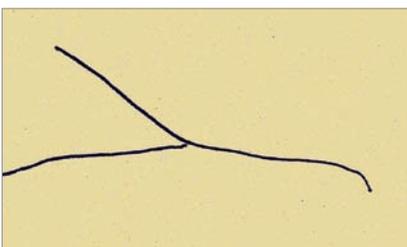
Top row
Elisabeth, Jenna, Aphra

Middle row
Ailish, Martje

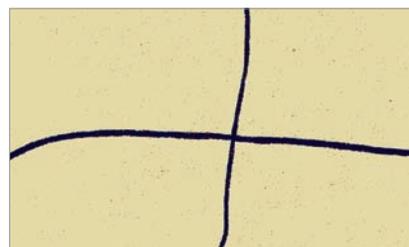
Bottom row
Jacob, Lily



Several members of the group experiment with designs.



'You see if the children go that way and children go that way they won't bump into each other.'



'I've got a good idea.'
He draws another plan.
'So you can go all different ways.'

Matthew from the Builder's Club comes to offer them some of his expertise and advice. He draws some designs for them.

Mosaics and Other Marvels

The group have experience of working with mosaic materials, and so the idea of using mosaic panels to form a jewelled path is introduced.



The children work on one large tile together, then develop individual mosaic panels to make up their path.

The educators observe that whilst there is a great deal of enthusiasm for creating the mosaic tiles, it seems to be the collecting, placing and arranging that is important to many of the children, rather than the creation of a path.



It is Jenna who is committed to the idea of the path, but who finds in the other path-makers, useful accomplices in her project.

Whilst the educators have suggested one method of creating a path, the children spontaneously develop another path idea using upturned bowls, logs, and lengths of fabric to create stepping-stones, connecting the dome and willow rocket together.

The Whole is Bigger than the Sum of the Parts



A rocket built, decorated, and connected to other sites in the garden, allows the children to experience the positive result of collaboration.

Matthew: 'The builders are the most important, 'cause if we don't build something, then the decorators have nothing to decorate and the pathmakers have nothing to make a path to.'

'The children used to be given work in a directed way, following the ideas of adults; frequently they lacked enthusiasm. Through observing engaged children, we've learned how we can support them. I've seen the enormous respect the children have given one another, sharing and discussing ideas and work.... children have seen each other in a new light, identified each other's skills and learnt from one another. I realise that before we hadn't really given the children the chance to be purposeful. If we seriously see children as competent and capable, and give them room to explore their interests, they will show us how eager and competent they really are.'