

Supporting Schemas

Does your child enjoy lining up all their toys or taking lids on or off anything and everything?
 Does your child throw objects or food, jump on the sofa or want to play with running water?
 Does your child wrap things up such as toys in blankets and want to make dens?
 These are all common behaviours linked to schemas.

Schemas are repeated patterns of behaviour demonstrated by young children, which they use to explore and make sense of the world around them. You will probably recognise some of these patterns of behaviour in your own child as we go through this factsheet. By watching your child’s activities, you can identify which schema they might be experiencing and start to plan experiences that they will enjoy and which extend their thinking.

The table below explores the different types of schemas and the common behaviours associated with each and offers practical ways to extend play opportunities at home. You may choose to use the suggested resources; please ensure your child’s safety at all times. The key words are suggestions for you to model to your child as they are playing so they link words to their actions or objects they are using.

Trajectory	
What does it mean?	The trajectory schema is one of the earliest schemas observed. Children are fascinated with the movement of themselves and objects, such as throwing objects or food from their pram or highchair, playing with running water from the tap, building and knocking down towers, climbing and jumping off furniture, throwing, bouncing or kicking balls.
How can I support my child at home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Throw balls or sponges at a target • Chase and catch bubbles • Make paper planes from folded paper • Drop different objects onto a target (try using different sizes, weights or shapes) • Make patterns by rolling marbles in a tray of paint • Make treasure baskets containing scarves, leaves, keys, lengths of fabric to flick, twirl and spin • Different sizes or weights of balls to throw, squeeze or roll • Roll balls, cars etc. down different lengths and sizes of tubing (such as guttering) • Make a simple skittles game with plastic bottles.
Key words I can use	Fly, spin, twirl, glide, float, drop, bounce, swing, up, down, fast, slow

Rotation	
What does it mean?	Children showing a rotational schema may display a preference for turning taps on and off, winding and unwinding string or playing with hoops. They may be fascinated with the physical experience of twirling and twisting their body, spinning around on the spot or rolling themselves down a hill. They have an interest in things that turn, such as wheels and windmills. They enjoy rolling tyres around, turning lids and watching the washing machine on a spin cycle.
How can I support my child at home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore toys with wheels and cogs • Use different sized balls for throwing, catching and kicking • Play with rattles, windmills, roundabouts and spinning toys • Locks and keys • Musical boxes • Explore spirals (snail shells, coils, springs) • Mixing and stirring paint • Make CD mobiles to hang from the ceiling or garden fence • Rotary whisks in bubbly water • Use paint rollers to make large scale pictures • Fill treasure baskets with bowls and spoons, bracelets and bangles, cotton reels • Use spanners and screwdrivers • Explore different sizes of wheels • Paint, draw and chalk circles, spirals to finger trace or run around outside • Hang spinning objects from the trees outside.
Keywords I can use	Fly, spin, twirl, round, circle, spiral, dizzy, twist

Enveloping and containing	
What does it mean?	Children with an enveloping schema are interested in covering and hiding items, including themselves. Young babies will explore ‘object permanence’ – this means knowing that something exists when they can’t see it, such as playing peek-a-boo or hide-and-seek. Older children will enjoy dressing up and filling and emptying bags and containers with different objects. This is often the time when you will lose household items, such as keys.
How can I support my child at home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrap presents • Use everyday objects such as pegs, curtain rings, keys and fir cones to wrap, hide and fill containers and bags • Swaddle dolls and teddies with blankets • Dress up with scarves, hats and lengths of material • Use old socks, pillowcases or cushion covers to stuff things into • Make sock or glove puppets

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mark making materials and envelopes of different sizes • Wrapping paper, newspaper, coloured cellophane, wallpaper, string, sticky tape and paperclips could be used to make parcels • Shape sorters • Role play – wrapping parcels in the post office, blankets to wrap babies in • Purses, boxes, tins, baskets, suitcases, glasses cases, wallets or bags with items for filling them • Bandages, scarves, large pieces of fabric to wrap yourself up in • Make pasta or pastry parcels • Cover boxes or tubes in wallpaper paste and decorate with string, wool, shiny paper • Play pass the parcel.
Keywords I can use	Under, over, seen, hidden, visible, invisible, transparent, hidden, wrapped, not wrapped, wrap, unwrap, full, not full, empty

Transporting	
What does it mean?	Children enjoy repeatedly moving objects around, from one place to another. They will carry many items at a time using their hands, pockets, containers, baskets or transporters.
How can I support my child at home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While in the garden or out and about in your community, gather twigs, pine cones, sticks and leaves. Children will enjoy exploring, sorting and transporting using buckets, boxes, bags, baskets and wheeled toys such as prams or trolleys • Provide wheeled toys e.g. pushchairs, trolleys and bags, baskets etc. so your child can independently move toys and objects from one place to another • Use diggers, tractors, wheelbarrows, trolleys and dumpers in the garden to transport sand, bark, pebbles, balls, cones and natural objects • Build a small world construction site for moving materials • Make twig boats to sail down guttering • Go on a hunt around the garden with buckets, bags etc for collecting things in • Provide a collection of purses, suitcases, rucksacks and bags for transporting things inside • Stacking toys, sorting toys • Ice cube trays, teapot and cups that can be filled with water, rice, pulses etc. using small spoons.
Keywords I can use	In, on, under, empty, not empty, full, not full, half full, overflowing, all gone, open, closed.

Connecting	
What does it mean?	Children displaying the connecting schema want to join items together. They find resources like string or sticky tape to tie or join things. They connect and disconnect toys such as rail tracks. They enjoy construction toys and exploring arts and crafts where they can glue and stick pieces together.
How can I support my child at home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make jewellery by threading pasta onto a string • Create models using junk materials • Peg up cards, photographs or washing • Make paper chains • Junk modelling with tape, string, glue, paperclips, ribbon etc • Old guttering, pipes, funnels, buckets for water play • Build spider webs with thread • Use natural materials such as twigs, willow, grasses to weave patterns • Build a train track or road • Construction toys that connect in different ways e.g. popping blocks, mobile, art straws etc • Outside make chalk trails to follow • Dressing up clothes using different fastenings.
Keywords I can use	Build, construct, join, separate, together, apart, flexible, rigid, bendy, stretchy, strong, fragile, tie, knot, thread

Enclosing	
What does it mean?	Children show an interest in enclosed spaces. They construct fences and barricades to enclose toy animals or themselves. They may build a train track and put toy animals in the centre.
How can I support my child at home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play with tents, tunnels and cardboard boxes • Play hide and seek • Make dens with blankets or bits of material, such as draping fabric over clothes airers secured with bulldog clips • Providing stones, shells or cardboard boxes with their toy animals and vehicles can enable children to have the opportunity to build fences/walls around these • Set up tunnels, hollow cubes or pop-up tents - put cushions and blankets inside • Use shoeboxes to build homes for small world toys • Make borders out of paper or twigs for creative projects • Scarves, blankets and bandages for wrapping things • Treasure baskets to include bracelets, bangles, necklaces, bandages, scarves, lengths of ribbon, saris or tinsel.

Keywords I can use	Enclose, wrap, inside, outside, comparison words such as bigger, smaller, longer and shorter, corner, side, contain, positional words such as on top, under, beside and inside.
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Transforming	
What does it mean?	Children are fascinated by how materials change and enjoy mixing substances together. Offer materials such as paint, water, ice, sand, mud and soil for mixing and discovering how materials change when mixed with other materials or when left to dry, melting, freezing and so on.
How can I support my child at home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make playdough from flour, oil and salt • Mix paints and paint with hands • Mix cornflour and water to make gloop • Add water to sand • Mix ingredients for baking • Add bubbles to water.
Keywords I can use	Use words such as mix, wet, dry. Ask your child questions such as, “I wonder what might happen when...”

Positioning	
What does it mean?	Children position, order and arrange objects or themselves. At times children may seem obsessive when placing items in the exact place (e.g. on top, next to, in front of, around the edge, beside, behind) of an object or person. Children may be observed lining up objects in order of size, colour or shape. It can also be noted that some children may not wish their food to be mixed together on the same plate.
How can I support my child at home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plenty of time and space to position resources in rows or lines • Large buttons, lolly sticks, feathers and natural materials such as shells, pebbles, corks and leaves will provide them with the opportunities to sort different objects by size, colour, pattern etc. sequencing and counting • Stacking objects and knocking them down or taking them apart • Lining up toys or materials • Balancing objects • Hide and seek games.
Keywords I can use	Inside, on top, under, behind, between, next to, in front.

If your child attends nursery, ask their key person about any schemas that your child may display at nursery and how you can work together to further support them. Your key person may have new ideas about how to support your child at home and may be able to provide you with some resources if you are struggling to find them.

It is important to remember that with everything, your child will change and adapt, so this schema may not last for very long, or they may continue with this behaviour for a while. Continue to look out for different signs and behaviours and keep talking to your child's key person at nursery if their habits and play choices change, so you can both adapt the activities and resources you provide and use with them.

Remember, some of these behaviours may seem a little frustrating at first, but if you provide opportunities for your child to include this behaviour in their play in a more constructive manner, you may still find the remote control in your shoes, but this will become less and less, and you will understand the reasons for this more.

Further information, support and resources

- Arnold, C. and the Pen Green Team (2010) *Understanding Schemas and Emotion in Early Childhood* London: Sage Publishers
- Featherstone, S. (2008) *Again, Again! Understanding schemas in young children* Featherstone Education Ltd
- Louis, S. (2011) *All about supporting schemas* Nursery World:
<https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/eyfs-best-practice-all-about-supporting-schemas>
- Nutbrown, C. (2006) *Threads of Thinking* London: Sage Publishers.