



## **Tip Number Nine: Following the children's interests**

In the early years of education, child-led play is a statutory duty. However, this concept can be applied to all children, whatever their age. Following the children's interests is believed to lead to deeper levels of thinking, learning and involvement. It makes perfect sense that for children and adults of all ages, if you are actively seeking interest in something, you are more likely learn effectively and to feel a greater sense of autonomy. It is important, perhaps now more than ever, to prioritise what children like to do and use our awareness of this to guide and provoke learning. With half-term just around the corner here are our top tips for this week...

### Top Tip Number 1 – Look more closely

Even very young children have interests. For example, a young baby or toddler is learning to roll, or crawl, or walk or jump. This is their current interest; they are determined to master the new skill, so they practice and practice. So we (often spontaneously) formulate experiences to encourage mastery of this new skill. We support and cheer on their efforts to jump, we jump with them, we sing and jump to make jumping fun. You take what the child is interested in learning about and making it interesting and engaging for them to learn it.

As parents, you are experts on your children and the things they like to do when they are playing. What does your child like to do? An older primary school child might be a Pokemon card enthusiast. Playing with Pokemon cards has many opportunities for learning key skills such as analytical thinking, strategy, weighing options and comparing numbers. Each Pokemon card tells a story, therefore encouraging imaginative play. Take a moment to look closer at what your child is doing and consider what skills they may be acquiring from it.

### Top Tip Number 2 – Engage in their interests

A well-known comedian once made a joke saying, 'I like my child, the only problem is I have absolutely nothing in common with them.' Whilst this remark is tongue-in-cheek, we recognise it can be mentally taxing for us adults to have endless conversations about Superzings and Frozen. However, don't underestimate the power of your interactions with your child's interests. An easy way to do this is to ask an 'I wonder' question, such as 'I wonder if Charazard would be able to defeat Jigglypuff'. Social learning theory suggests that children learn through observing the behaviour and language displayed by others. Through modelling, children learn a wide array of complicated skills, such as language and social interaction. This is probably something you are doing all of the time anyway!

### Top Tip Number 3 – 'Sustained Shared Thinking'

Sustained Shared Thinking is a teaching term batted around in the Early Years sector yet is applicable to education at all levels. In basic terms SST describes those lovely, in-depth conversations that you have with children about anything and everything. Here's an example:

**CHILD A:** [Who has been taking great interest in various items floating on water], “Look at the fir cone. There’s bubbles of air coming out.”

**ADULT:** “It’s spinning around.” [Modelling curiosity and desire to investigate further]

**CHILD A:** “That’s ‘cos it’s got air in it.”

**ADULT:** [Picks up the fir cone and shows the children how the scales go round the fir cone in a spiral, turning the fir cone round with a winding action], “When the air comes out in bubbles it makes the fir cone spin around.”

**CHILD B:** [Uses a plastic tube to blow into the water], “Look bubbles.”

**ADULT:** “What are you putting into the water to make bubbles?.....What’s coming out of the tube?”

**CHILD B:** “Air.”

#### Top Tip Number 4 – Enabling environments

Put simply, to ‘enable the environment’ can mean to put out open-ended resources for children to engage with. This is another seemingly obvious tip but noteworthy, nonetheless. Everything you are providing your children with is helping them to learn. Adults play a vital role in setting up an environment, whether it’s arranging a cosy den with books, emptying the recycling onto a table or putting ice in a tray. Often the best learning doesn’t come from pre-prepared lesson plans, which could miss opportunities to capitalise on the unexpected.

Perhaps you have found reluctance with getting your child to do writing at home. Would they be more interested if you supplied them with paper and pencils without a learning objective and a WAGOLL (What a Good One Looks Like) but simply for the pleasure of writing? Perhaps even more so if the pencils and paper were in a den made from sheets draped over a few chairs. A child-led writing outcome might be interesting and is not something older primary children get the chance to do as often as our younger ones. Your role in following the children’s interests is to facilitate, question, encourage and praise but not aim to control the creative process.