

Our Continuous Provision Curriculum

Heuristic Play

Heuristic Play Heuristic - adjective

“enabling a person to discover or learn something for themselves.”

Have you ever experienced a specific moment with a child where they'd rather play with the box that a new toy has come in rather than the toy itself? Or even another everyday object over a new toy? If you have, this is what is known as heuristic play.



What is heuristic play?

The term heuristic play was coined by Elinor Goldschmied (1910-2009) in the 1980s and became a formal term in the book *People Under Three: Young Children in Daycare*. In a book she co-authored with Sonia Jackson they explain heuristic play is for babies and children in their 2nd year.

The term “Heuristic Play” describes the interaction of babies and children with everyday objects – not toys.”



Today, children are surrounded by loud, colourful toys that tend to be made out of plastic or wood, and while these might be good at stimulating some of the senses, they tend to lack the sensory and heuristic properties critical for supporting creative thinking and problem-solving skills.

Put simply, Heuristic Play consists of offering a group of children, for a defined period of time in a controlled environment, a large number of objects and receptacles with which they play freely without adult intervention.

Goldschmied saw Heuristic Play as a non-prescriptive approach to learning. With no single way to do it. The collections of objects and receptacles used are an expression of creativity by the adults. Geography may well determine some of the objects.

Heuristic play is about curiosity and exploration. As children select, manipulate, explore, compare items they discover what the object can and can't do. This sometimes includes sharing. Although sharing is spontaneous, if there are enough items sharing isn't required.



Space to move around with the objects is part of the sessions described by Goldschmied. Also allow time to fully explore the objects before children help collect the items and return them to the receptacles.

With heuristic play, this involves the sensory exploration of 'everyday items,' anything from some rice or pasta or a wooden spoon to a piece of string or sticks from the garden. The difference between this and playing with toys is that toys are often limiting in what they can do, meaning a car is meant to be rolled back and forth, while heuristic play with any household object allows children's creativity to take over. Having an open-ended object to play with stimulates innovation, creativity and imagination as the child discovers the ways the object can be used, all characteristics of which are essential to learning and development.



Why is Heuristic Play good for children?

"Toys that do less, actually teach more."

1. It stimulates creativity and imagination.
Imagination leads a child's play with heuristic objects, rather than muscle memory taking over when a child knows that a noise happens when they push a button. With heuristic play, open-ended play opportunities allow children to explore, learn and develop in a completely natural way.
2. It supports gross motor skills and brain development in infants and toddlers.

Infants and toddlers, in particular, require a variety of sensory exploration to support their cognitive growth and development. With heuristic play, they are able to do this on a much wider scale than with toys that may limit their abilities to develop.

3. It stimulates multiple senses and critical thinking.

When a child pushes a button on a book and it makes a sound, they learn that this action makes that sound and that sound corresponds to whatever context is on that particular page. With heuristic play, children can make sounds from banging different objects together or knocking them against another surface. However, unlike the toy, this leads them to figure out the context for themselves – why did that make this sound? What would happen if I banged this item with a different item? All of these questions only come about by exploring and they are far more valuable later in life when our children need to develop certain skills such as innovation and critical thinking.

4. It promotes early mathematical conceptual learning.

When a child is exposed to a variety of items that range in size, shape, weight and texture, the time they spend exploring only aids their mathematical conceptual learning. This doesn't tend to happen with typical toys as the need to explore is lessened when they know what the toy is meant to do.

5. It allows children to gain an understanding of the world around them and encourages independence. The mantra that “toys that do less, actually do more” is very relevant to heuristic play. It means that basic, everyday objects that we consider boring (or not toys) actually offer a world of possibilities to learn for our children. While they learn to play they also start to gain an understanding of the world around them, and more importantly, especially with children today, they learn that they don't need much to self-entertain. It is through handling and exploring these objects that babies and toddlers begin to make their own choices and decisions and start to develop as people.

How to encourage Heuristic Play?

To help support children's learning and development, we provide them with more opportunities for open-ended discovery. For instance, we use the 'treasure chest' method where you fill boxes / baskets with heuristic objects of different sizes and textures and let the children discover them for themselves. Children are always supervised, but it is essential that children are allowed the freedom to choose and explore the objects without being offered the objects first. Parents / carers can easily do this at home by filling a box with household objects such as egg boxes, measuring spoons, and shower puffs and sometimes outdoor objects such as leaves and pinecones. It is important to rotate them fairly frequently to encourage new and different learning experiences.

Usually, 30 - 40 minutes a day is enough for the treasure basket heuristic play, so make sure that you clear a space for it with no other toys around and take the basket away once the children are satisfied so that they don't tire of the objects. It is also important that the adults supervise and observe but don't use verbal prompts, encourage or distract. Children need the freedom to explore on their own at their own pace without adult direction. As well as the treasure basket, heuristic play opportunities can be offered at any time, such as taking children outdoors more often to explore objects in the environment.

Heuristic Play is important to the children's development. By offering children heuristic objects that support their creative thinking or taking them outdoors to explore nature, we are essentially giving them the best start in life in order for them to become better adults when they grow up.

Items That Could Help Heuristic Play

A list of suggested items could include: (bear in mind mouths may explore many of these items)



- Paper / cardboard objects: Egg boxes, notebook, sturdy cardboard tubes, grease-proof paper.
- Wooden objects: Door wedge, small turned bowl, dolly pegs, egg cup, wooden egg, spoons, curtain rings, coaster, bracelet, block, napkin rings, dowel, empty salt and pepper cellars.
- Leather, textile, rubber, or fur objects: Small knitted toy, bean bag, piece of flannel, velvet powder puff, bags of herbs, bag of lavender, leather key ring, coloured ribbons, leather purse.
- Rubber objects: Ball, bath plug with chain, soap holder, door stop, coaster. Metal objects: Honey drizzler, an egg cup, curtain ring, egg poacher, measuring spoons, tea strainer, whisk, powder compact, bells, lemon squeezer, small bowl.
- Natural objects: A lemon or orange, coconut shell, grass rope, sheepskin, pumice stone, loofah, shells, pine/fir cones, driftwood, avocado stone, large pebbles.
- Brushes: Scrubbing brush, pastry brush, baby's hair brush, nail brush, makeup brush, paint brush, shaving brush, wooden toothbrush.
- Other objects: small vanilla essence or food colouring bottle, hair rollers, small mirror, scent bags, bone shoe horn, ceramic bowl.