

How schema theory might help us support children's communication development.



Emma Hewitt is a Senior Education Tutor/Researcher at the Pen Green Research Base, part of the pioneering Pen Green Centre in Corby, Northamptonshire. This July the centre celebrates its fortieth year of responsively and innovatively supporting children and families, through collaboration with and celebration of the local community. Here she gives an example, from her own MA studies (one of the many courses on offer at the Pen Green Centre), of how schema theory might help us support children's speech, language and communication development.

When did you first think about schema as a form of communication?

Schema theory and language development have long been two professional interests of mine, so when I embarked on my MA dissertation back in 2018 I wanted to explore whether there was a connection between these two areas of practice that I seemed to be consistently drawn to. When I shared my initial idea with a colleague, a self-confessed 'schema-sceptic', she asked me: 'so, when did you first think of schema as a form of communication?' Which confirmed two things: firstly, perhaps I always had and secondly, maybe that was the connection. As I embarked upon my studies I hoped to explore further the idea that we might consider children's schematic interests as an alternative form of communication regarding their cognitive and emotional concerns, providing further understanding that we might then use to support traditional language development.

Children's schematic play as early communication:

We already know that most communication is non-verbal and we see young children sharing their developing ideas about the world around them and trying to make sense of their experiences through their physical actions daily. From the pre-schooler who has just become a big brother putting dolls up his jumper, to my own toddler repeatedly bringing me her Dad's slippers when he is away for work. We also know, from both experience and the plethora of speech, language and communication resources available to us, that children are more likely to speak about things that interest them and use language that they have repeatedly experienced in a meaningful context.

Although no one is entirely sure how exactly we humans come to communicate with others, it is generally acknowledged that there are physical, social and cognitive aspects to learning language and knowing about young Children's schema, as partial concepts, can support parents and practitioners in offering relevant language for children to learn and begin using themselves.

Research summary:

During my studies I engaged in close observation of four young children across the Pen Green nursery spaces, two under-three and two over-three years old. During those moments when they were deeply involved in their play, I concluded that young children seemed to be developing their thinking by engaging in repeated schematic actions. 'James' for example, demonstrated a strong interest in following a trajectory schema – running and chasing, climbing up and sliding down the slide, building towers, connecting train tracks and sitting atop larger towers of big blocks – and in doing so seemed to be starting to make sense of the concepts of line, number and order.

To find out more about children's schematic play as early communication and how to support this in your setting, please sign up to our webinar. How Schema Theory might help us support children's communication and development Wednesday 24th May 6-7pm.

How schema theory might help us support children’s communication development.



Thoughtful and attuned adults were then offering children relevant, socially constructed, ‘labels’ for their individual schematic actions – or externalised thoughts about the world around them. This important contribution from adults, offering language which matches children’s concrete and abstract understanding, or thoughts, is referred to as ‘word-to-world’ mapping (Hollich et al 2003) in language development literature. Supporting the socio-culturalist view that children learn language through playful conversation and experience. In his play, for example, I noticed ‘James’ begin to adopt some of the language being offered which was associated with these important mathematical concepts that he was exploring, such as position and order. And on one particular occasion, after he came last down the slide, I observed him shout out to his friend ‘but, first one to the gate is the winner!’

In practice this might mean:

When planning for children, time and space should be allowed to collectively consider children’s current and ongoing conceptual concerns, in relation to their action schema, so that all practitioners might be aware and therefore able to offer relevant language which will support children’s thinking and learning. Sharing this with parents would be equally beneficial.

Alongside a rich understanding of the individual children and their contexts, practitioners should then be able to support language development, using strategies such as: appropriately ‘commenting’ on what children are doing in relation to schema, responding to their utterances with ‘expansions’ relating to their conceptual concerns, or ‘recasting’ back what they say in the right form, without correcting them.

- Do you too consider schemas an alternative form of communication about the world, especially for non-verbal children (i.e. young children, those with SEND or learning EAL?)
- Do you utilise language strategies such as commenting, expanding and recasting words and phrases which are relevant to children’s schematic interests?
- Do you discuss what children may be communicating through their schematic play with parents/carers?

Children’s schematic play as early communication:

My dissertation is published in full here:
Hewitt, E. (2021) ‘An exploration of the relationship between schema and language: four young child case studies’ Early Child Development and Care DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2021.1954628

...and, alongside many other interesting reflections about schema, here: Arnold, C. (ed.) and The Pen Green Schema Group Schemas in the Early Years: Exploring Beneath the Surface Through Observation and Dialogue London: Routledge

Arnold, C. (2018) ‘How action schemas are reflected in young children’s emerging language’ Early Childhood Development and Care DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2018.1247087

The Department for Education Help for Early Years Providers website offers resources, activity ideas and advice for teaching communication and language to early years children.



The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Evidence Store provides evidence informed approaches and practices to support communication and language development in the early years.



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