

# NURTURING CREATIVITY AND CURIOSITY: OPEN-ENDED SMALL WORLD PLAY



In the world of early childhood education, Small World play has long been recognised as a powerful tool for supporting children's development. By creating miniature worlds filled with engaging resources, we can invite children to explore, imagine, and create their own meaningful interpretations of the world. However, as this case study reveals, the true potential of Small World play is unlocked when we embrace open-ended materials and the unique experiences each child brings to their playing and learning space.

Hello, I am Dr Alistair Bryce-Clegg, an Early Years consultant, author, and trainer.

Throughout my career, I have been passionate about supporting play-based learning experiences that nurture children's creativity and imagination.



## THE FARM: EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY



This case study is based on a two day observation in a UK preschool classroom, where the team had recently set up a toy farm as part of their focus on Spring. The goal was to inspire engaging play centred around themes of new life and growth. The team had set up a 'tuff spot' with an extensive farm play set that included a variety of animals, people, farm buildings and machinery. However, as the team observed the children's interactions, they quickly realised that their expectations of what was going to happen during "farm play" were not aligned with the children's diverse backgrounds, experiences or interests.

I was particularly drawn to Alfie's interaction with the provision. Despite his best efforts, Alfie struggled to engage in farm-related play. Instead, he resorted to having the farm animals engage in a very noisy 'battle'. Although he showed high levels of interest and engagement with the battling animals, his play prompted an adult to intervene and redirect him to move elsewhere. It could be that Alfie had no experience of what a farm was to draw on, or that he had no interest in the farm. Nevertheless, his battle play was valid in its own right, it just didn't match the pre-determined outcome linked to this provision, or the expectations of the adult, and therefore it was closed down. This highlights the importance of making sure that there is always breadth in the resources that we provide which allows us to support each child's individual context when planning play activities (Broadhead, 2004).

## INTRODUCING OPEN-ENDED MATERIALS: A CATALYST FOR CREATIVITY

Following some discussion around Alfie's interaction with the farm play, the team decided to introduce a variety of more open-ended materials alongside the farm resources. The next day, the small world area was enhanced with an array of natural and open-ended elements, such as wooden blocks, fabric pieces, sticks, and stones. The farm resources were placed in a basket, still easily accessible to the children. The impact of this simple change was remarkable.

The team noted that children, including Alfie, were keen to engage with the Small World area, spending significantly more time there in play. The open-ended materials acted as a catalyst for creativity, enabling children to construct their own stories and scenarios, many of which held personal meaning. This type of play, where children can explore and make sense of their world, express thoughts and feelings, and practice social skills, is crucial for their cognitive, social, and emotional development (Vygotsky, 1978; Broadhead, 2004; Bruce, 2001).

# THE POWER OF REAL-LIFE CONNECTIONS

One of the most striking observations from this case study was the way in which children used open-ended materials to recreate situations from their own lives. By providing resources that allowed for flexibility and personal interpretation, the team had created a space where children could process and make sense of their unique experiences.



As Bruce (2001) states, 'Play that is related to the child's real life is more likely to support learning and development than play which is artificial or unrelated to the child's experience' (p. 62). When children engage in play that mirrors their real-life experiences, they are able to navigate complex emotions, build social connections, and develop a deeper understanding of the world around them.

## THE ADULT AS CO-WONDERER: SCAFFOLDING LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

The introduction of open-ended materials not only transformed the children's play but also created abundant opportunities for educators to engage as co-wonderers. By asking open-ended questions and providing gentle guidance, the adults in the room were able to scaffold children's learning and support the development of problem-solving skills.

This approach, grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development, recognises the vital role of adult support in extending children's learning. By meeting children at the edge of their current understanding and providing just the right amount of assistance, educators can help children reach new heights in their cognitive and social development.

## OBSERVATION AND REFLECTION: THE KEYS TO REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Perhaps one of the most powerful aspects of this case study is the value of the observations and reflections of the team. It can often be challenging to make time to stand back and look at children using the provision, but by taking the time to observe children's play and reflect on their own expectations, this team were able to adapt their practice to better support children's engagement, learning and development.

This reflective approach, as highlighted by Schön (1983), is essential for creating responsive and effective learning environments. When educators engage in a continuous cycle of observation, reflection, and adaptation, they are better equipped to meet the diverse needs of the children in their care.

## THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF SMALL WORLD PLAY

As this case study demonstrates, Small World play has the power to transform children's learning experiences when educators embrace open-ended materials and recognise the unique experiences each child brings to the classroom. By providing resources that allow children to explore their own interests and make connections to their real lives, we can support the development of cognitive, social, and emotional skills that will serve children well beyond their early years.

Moreover, by engaging as co-wonderers and reflecting on our own practice, we can create learning environments that are responsive, engaging, and deeply respectful of children's individual needs and backgrounds. In doing so, they lay the foundation for a lifelong love of learning and a strong sense of self.

# REFERENCES

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The Department for Education Early years Child Development Training offers free training modules for practitioners on brain development and how children learn.

<https://child-development-training.education.gov.uk/>



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The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Evidence Store provides evidence informed approaches and practices to support self regulation and executive function and understanding child development.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/support-for-schools/evidence-for-the-early-years/early-years-evidence-store>



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