

## EXPLORATORY PLAY

**E**xploratory play is the stuff of curiosity and inquiry. It begins as soon as the baby is aware that something shiny is dangling over her head and she reaches out to examine what it is. Exploratory play is highly physical in the early stages as the infant or toddler uses all of his body to explore the world around him. By age four, exploratory play is soaring. Children who have been encouraged to explore freely and without undue limits will continue to use exploration as a means of learning about the world in which they live. By the middle years, as any teacher of the Junior Division knows, there is nothing that holds more interest for many at this age than taking things apart and putting them back together.

Materials are an important part of exploration. Children learn about the characteristics of materials as they interact with them and this knowledge is important for scientific experiments. They learn about the characteristics of shapes as they build with blocks – an important learning for understanding geometry.

With or without materials, children explore position as they move themselves and objects in different spatial configurations. Position is relevant to movement and dance, as well as geometry.

Exploration flourishes in an emotional environment that encourages initiative, curiosity, and problem-solving. Placing too much emphasis on the end product or on using tools in the “correct” way causes children to lose confidence in themselves and inhibits risk-taking. Teachers will know when to interject prompt questions or demonstrate how some tools work so that the exploration does not become frustrating for the child.

As the child matures, all five senses are engaged in exploring and learning about the world. Children use their senses so much, it might be said that they are keen observers of the world as a result. They absorb a great deal of information as they watch the emergence of the butterfly from the chrysalis, as they listen to the seeds shaking in their pod, as they smell the fragrances of the different flowers, and as they touch a sample of snake skin. They bring this world knowledge to their reading and writing, and they use this ‘data’ to make comparisons.

Children have been involved in some form of inquiry from infancy as they explored their effect on objects in their world. Inquiry is an important component of the kindergarten program and the primary grades as children continue to experiment in an effort to discover more about a particular interest that intrigues them. By the end of the Intermediate Division, exploration is the essence of scientific inquiry. It is the process that enables the researcher to find solutions for the many challenges in our world, and the artist to create innovative works.

The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Science and Technology uses the words investigate through experimentation. The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Mathematics refers to children developing problem-solving strategies as they pose and solve problem and conduct investigations. While exploration is acknowledged in these curriculum areas as an important component of learning, it is not explicitly connected to the elements of play.

