

It's not a box!

When is a box not a box? When it is a plane, a train, a bus, a car, a space rocket, a bed or a boat. In fact it can be anything you like, as long as you have a rich imagination, and especially if you are a child. I have long been fascinated by the way children play with large cardboard boxes. For some children it is enough to give them a box, and by the force of sheer imagination, they turn into whatever they want it to be at that moment. This sophisticated role-play can also generate rich language and social interaction between children. But it is not enough to put a box out and sit back and observe the amazing role-play and language that emerges. The role of the adult is crucial.

Judith Twani supported a day care setting to devote a whole week to developing activities with cardboard boxes, with spectacular results: for the adults as well as the children. Judith is an Early Years Consultant and Children's Centre Teacher in Thurrock, Essex, and much of her work involves influencing parents and practitioners' approaches to language, play and learning. Judith takes up the story: "The whole idea came from observations of how children of different ages play with boxes. I have been using boxes in my groups for parents with children aged 0-2, and with childminders. I attended one of Michael's courses, and he introduced me to the fabulous picture book, *Not a box!* by Antoinette Portis (published by Harper Collins). In this book a rabbit turns a box into all sorts of different things, from a fire engine to a mountain. After that my play and learning sessions with boxes became known as 'It's not a box!' sessions."

Judith was particularly struck by the response of one childminder with a mixed age group, who finds that the children she cares for usually don't cooperate, and argue a lot. However when the childminder set up her own 'It's not a box!' session with a large cardboard box, she was astonished that the children played and cooperated well - for three hours!

This inspired Judith to explore in depth the potential of cardboard boxes for play, language and learning, and particularly for cooperative play and social development. She asked a few settings to make observations, and take photographs as evidence. Staff at Little Angels Day Nursery, an all-day care setting for children from six months to five years, were very keen to join in. Like many day care settings, Little Angels is organised into three rooms: Baby Room for children from six months to two years; the '2s to 3s' Room; and the '3s to 5s'. Judith and Deputy manager Sarah (add surname) were already involved in some reflective work based on *Learning, Playing and Interacting: Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage*, and the initial work with boxes triggered the idea of using the box observations to illustrate some of the principles in the book.

The core theme of *Learning, Playing and Interacting* is that adults can best support children's learning if we are clear about our role in different activities. Adults have options in the way that they plan learning activities, and how we interact with children in particular can either extend or inhibit learning and social development. The booklet suggests that there is a continuum of adult support, that includes unstructured play and child initiated play at one end of the spectrum, and with focused learning and highly structured intervention at the other. From my own experience, most practitioners are comfortable with their role in focused learning and highly structured activities, (where the elements of adult preparation and control are high, but are less clear about the distinction between unstructured and child-initiated play, and how adults' involvement can be useful.

As Judith puts it, "I came up with the rough plan for how a week of activities with boxes might look, involving all the children in various age groups, and including activities that involved, unstructured play, child-initiated play, focused learning and highly structured approaches from adults. I went in every day to see what was happening and talk through what the staff were finding out. "

Here is a very brief account of what happened.

The setting was very fortunate to have a contact at Blacks Outdoor Leisure in Thurrock, who provided them with access to an almost unlimited supply of large boxes. Parents were also asked to donate boxes of all different shapes and sizes, and to be prepared to ask their children what they had been doing with them.

Unstructured Play

Monday was 'Unstructured Play Day', with no adult involvement, apart from minimal supervision. In the 3s to 5s room children almost ignored boxes during the morning, and one child asked if they could move them because they were in the way! (Reflect: Why did this happen?) One child, who arrived at lunchtime, immediately started to play with the boxes, and this drew all other children in. They began pulling each other around in the boxes, and made boats with them outside in the puddles.

In the 2s-3s room the children were immediately engaged: and especially enjoyed climbing in and out.

Child initiated play

Tuesday was 'Child-initiated play day'. The staff were clear about their role, which was to provide the resources, and to follow the children's lead in how they use those resources. The adults joined in the children's play as a participant, and not as a leader. The adults were also aware that these play sequences could go on for some time, so adults would need to be available throughout.

In the 3s-5s room there were high levels of involvement and cooperation, and all the adults were able to be involved. One boy, Kiean, was standing in a box and shouting, "Africa is that way and London is that way!" "We need a map". On the way across the ocean he 'fed the sharks' and explained, "They are hungry two times; no four times." (Using his fingers to demonstrate 'four'). Two girls were very deeply involved in using Sellotape and a box to make a boat.

Children in the 2s to 3s room again demonstrating high levels of involvement with the boxes and in the Baby Room the babies and adults played playing peek-a-boo. Painting of boxes and sitting in them became favourite activities!

Focused learning

'Focused learning Wednesday' involved adults taking the lead in activities.

Nonetheless, these activities were playful, and were based around what the adults now knew were children's definite interests. They introduced the "Not a Box" book, to the older children, and explored the different things the box becomes. They discussed with the children the various possibilities for what they could transform their boxes into, and linked these ideas to what they had already made.

The adults came to an agreement with the children about what they will make, and what resources they will need. Naturally this approach was only relevant for the older children, and they responded well, and freely engaged with the book and repeated the refrain "It's not a box" every time it occurred. The book then influenced how the children then played with the boxes.

Highly structured

Highly structured Thursday

Adult directed and controlled

(Judith can you mention **briefly** what happened here? Was it as successful? Were the children ready for this type of involvement because they had already been busy with boxes intensively for the previous three days?)

When I arrived on Friday morning (Friday was back to child-initiated play) to take photographs, there were boxes of all sizes everywhere, and children completely involved in cutting, sticking, painting or just sitting and imagining. The children even wanted to turn over a box and use it as a table at snack time!

Judith summed up for me the impact that the project had had on the children. "Staff had observed children's increased concentration and sustained focus, with many examples of higher levels of sharing, turn-taking and co-operation. Some adults were delighted that the children had got more out of the week than they had expected. The decision to introduce the book only after the children had played with the boxes had paid off, as they were much more engaged with the book than they would have expected, and incorporated the refrain of, "It's not a box!" into their play. In fact there seems to be limitless possibilities with what children of all ages can do with a box: providing the adults provide the right environment and behave in a sensitive and appropriate way."

Impact on staff

And what did the adults think? Here are some of their reactions: "I really enjoyed observing the children's play and writing observations – I got loads!" "I didn't realise how much play, language and learning could come from a box, and it's free!" "We had informed the parents the week before, so they were asking us lots of questions about what was happening. They also asked their children what they had done with the boxes every day, which got the children talking much more." "The time seemed to fly by, and we must definitely plan to do similar projects regularly, and particularly where we can make links with a book.

So when is a box not a box? When it's in the hands of a child!

Michael Jones is an early years trainer and writer, and Early Language Consultant for the Every Child a Talker projects in Bedford and Thurrock.

Further information

Learning, Playing and Interacting: Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage can be downloaded from

www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/242798

For a detailed account of the 'It's not a box!' project, and the implications for adult support and children's learning, contact Judith Twani at jtwni@thurrock.gov.uk