



Interest-Based Child Participation in Everyday Learning Activities

Melinda Raab

CASEinPoint, 2005
Volume 1, Number 2

CASEinPoint is an electronic publication of the Center for the Advanced Study of Excellence in Early Childhood and Family Support Practices, Family, Infant and Preschool Program, J. Iverson Riddle Developmental Center, Morganton, NC. CASE is an applied research center focusing on the characteristics of evidence-based practices and methods for promoting utilization of practices informed by research.

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ABSTRACT

This paper includes a description of the characteristics and consequences of children's interest-based participation in everyday learning activities. A framework illustrating how interest-based participation in everyday family and community activities promotes child learning and development is included. Strategies are described for identifying and using child interests as the basis for promoting learning and development. The benefits of children's interest-based participation in everyday activities also are described.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this *CASEinPoint* is to describe the characteristics of interest-based participation in everyday family and community activities promoting child learning and development. Interest-based learning refers to children's engagement in activities providing them opportunities to express their interests and acquire new knowledge and abilities. Interest-based child learning is a characteristic of the Child Learning Opportunities component of an integrated framework (Dunst, 2000, Dunst, 2004) used for implementing evidence-based early childhood intervention practices.

INTEREST-BASED LEARNING

Researchers, practitioners, and parents have acknowledged for nearly a century the benefits of providing children opportunities for interest-based involvement in a variety of experiences promoting their learning and development (Dewey, 1913; Krapp, Hidi, & Renninger, 1992; Vygotsky, 1967). Child interests influence children's participation in activities, the ways in which they engage in activities, and their development of new understanding and abilities (Krapp et al., 1992). The everyday activities making up children's family and community life provide the contexts for interest-based learning (Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, 2002).

Figure 1 illustrates how child interests influence and are related to child learning and development (Dunst, 2001; Dunst et al., 2001; Dunst, Herter, & Shields, 2000). When child interests are used as the basis for their involvement in everyday activity, children become occupied by playing, interacting, and participating in the

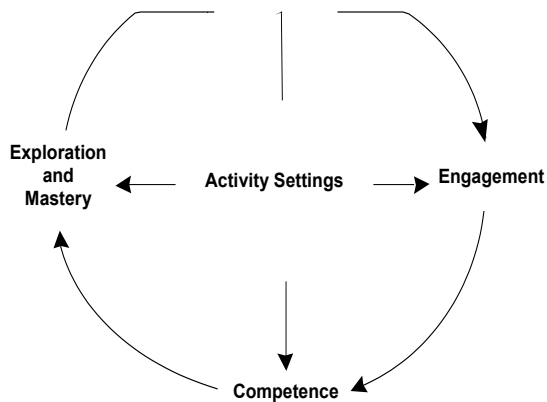


Figure 1. Characteristics of everyday activities promoting child learning and development. Reprinted from “Everyday Children’s Learning Opportunities: Characteristics and Consequences,” by C. J. Dunst, 2000, *Children’s Learning Opportunities Report*, 2(1). Copyright 2000 by Winterberry Press.

activity. When this occurs, we say that a child is engaged. Children who are engaged in an activity have opportunities to practice existing capabilities and learn new skills. They can try out new things, explore, and find out how their own behaviors make things happen. Their recognition of their own abilities strengthens their sense of mastery, which leads to continued interest and participation in the activity.

What Are Child Interests?

Two types of interest can influence a child’s involvement and learning in everyday activities: *personal interests* and *situational interests* (Krapp et al., 1992; Renninger, 2000). Consider the following examples.

- Harper loves bugs! Being involved with bugs is one of her favorite things to do. Even when she was very little, she seemed to love watching and learning about bugs. As she has grown, her knowledge about and love for bugs has grown, too. She likes doing activities with bugs more than doing almost anything else. No matter what the situation or circumstance, if bugs are involved, Harper wants to be there. She loves to spend time watching bugs, searching for and finding bugs, picking out and looking at books about bugs, pretending to be a bug, collecting bugs she finds in the yard, and talking to others about bugs.
- Harvey was digging in the backyard garden with his mother. He picked up a rock and discovered pill bugs under it. He watched and investigated them, poked at them so they curled into a ball, and called to his

mother to come look at them. After a while, he replaced the rock and began to dig again.

For Harper, bugs are a *personal interest*. Personal interests are a child’s individual likes, preferences, favorites, etc. (Dunst et al., 2000). They involve both a child’s knowledge of and positive feelings about an experience, object, or activity (Renninger, 1992, 2000). Personal interests are specific to individuals and tend to endure and evolve over time and across different situations (Renninger, 2000).

In contrast to Harper’s individual interest in bugs, Harvey gets involved with bugs because of a *situational interest*. Situational interests refer to interests that are evoked by the interestingness of a situation or context (Krapp et al., 1992). Situational interest emerges when the characteristics or features of an activity, toy, material, person, or event attract a child’s attention, arouse his or her curiosity, or invite him or her to become involved. Situations that have elements of novelty, surprise, exploration, or the unexpected can evoke situational interest.

Table 1 includes other examples that differentiate between the two types of interests. Both personal interests and situational interests affect whether and how a child engages in an activity, and consequently the opportunities the child has for practicing existing abilities and learning new things.

How Can Child Interests Be Identified?

Strategies for identifying a child’s personal interests include informally observing what a child does as part of his or her involvement in everyday activities, asking parents what they know and recognize about children’s interests, and asking a child about his or her own likes and preferences. The following questions developed by Dunst, Herter, and Shields (2000) are useful for identifying child interests:

- What makes the child smile and laugh?
- What makes the child happy and feel good?
- What gets the child excited?
- What are the child’s favorite things to do?
- What things are particularly enjoyable and interesting to the child?
- What does the child especially work hard at doing?
- What gets and keeps the child’s attention?
- What behaviors does the child particularly like to do?
- What “brings out the best” in the child?
- What gets the child to try new things?
- What does the child choose to do most often?

These types of questions, whether used to guide observations of children’s activities or conversations with par-

Table 1
Examples of Personal and Situational Interests

Personal Interests	Situational Interests
<p>You can find Ivy involved with music almost anytime during the day! She loves to listen to music whenever there's a chance, learn the words to songs and sing them just about anywhere, hum to herself in the bathtub, make up songs on her own, participate in a children's music group, or make and play "musical instruments."</p>	<p>At the community children's festival, Woody was enthralled by all there was to see. He noticed a group of young children singing a song on stage. He pulled his mother toward the stage, listened and clapped to the song, and "danced" to the music. Soon after the singing ended, he was ready to find something else to do.</p>
<p>Brian has always loved the water and finds all kinds of ways to enjoy it. He likes swimming in a swimming pool, splashing in a rain puddle, washing the dog, pouring and squirting water in the bathtub, watering plants, cleaning the fish tank, brushing teeth, or running through the sprinkler. He spends so much time in the water, his mom jokes that she has a hard time getting him out of it.</p>	<p>Brianna was playing chase with her dog outdoors after a hard rain. A small stream of rainwater flowing down the driveway caught her attention. Curious, she stopped to feel the water flowing over her hands, watched leaves floating in the stream, and splashed the rainwater with a stick. Shortly, she returned to the game of chase.</p>

ents, yield a profile of child interests that can be used as a basis for promoting participation in everyday activities (see also, Dunst, Roberts, & Snyder, 2004).

How Can Child Interests Be Used to Encourage Participation in Everyday Activities?

Encouraging children's involvement in everyday activities can be done using both situational and personal interests as the basis for inviting and maintaining child participation and promoting child learning. Situational interest can be evoked by providing a child access to toys, materials, or activities that are new or unusual, doing things that are unexpected or surprising, or providing the child opportunities to explore, investigate, and satisfy his or her curiosity. Taking a child to a new shadow puppet exhibit at the children's museum and letting her explore how the puppets can be manipulated to make shadows is an example of evoking a situational interest in the context of a community activity.

Child personal interests can be used to encourage participation in everyday activities by increasing a child's opportunities to be involved in activities that match his or her interests as part of the child's everyday family and community life (Dunst, 2001; Dunst et al., 2000). An example of using a child's interest in animals as the basis for participation would involve (a) knowing that the child especially likes animals, (b) determining the everyday activities that would provide him opportunities to be engaged with animals (e.g., playing with the family's dog, feeding ducks at the pond, petting goats and rabbits

at the petting zoo, visiting a pet store, watching the fish at the library aquarium, playing with toy animal families), and (c) giving the child lots of chances to do those kinds of activities. Using planning calendars or simple reminder lists showing the everyday activities that provide opportunities for interest expression are an effective way to increase a child's opportunities for interest-based participation in the activities (Dunst et al., 2001).

What Are the Benefits of Interest-Based Participation in Everyday Activities?

Interest-based participation in everyday activities can benefit young children in a number of ways (Raab & Dunst, in press). Research suggests that the benefits of using child interests as the basis for involvement in activities include, but are not limited to, positive child engagement (e.g., Odom, Brown, Schwartz, Zercher, & Sandall, 2002), positive peer social interaction (e.g., Renninger, 1990), increased communicative competence (e.g., Bruder, Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 2004), positive child behavior (e.g., Dunst, 2003; Dunst et al., 2001), and child developmental progress (e.g., Dunst et al., 2001; Dunst, Trivette, & Cutspec, 2002). In short, things that are interesting and interest-based provide children opportunities to learn about themselves and their world. They learn about their own abilities, how they can influence things and people, and how people and objects respond to them in predictable ways. They can become more competent participants in the activities and settings around them (Shweder et al., 1998).

CONCLUSION

Child interests involve a child's likes, preferences, talents, favorites, etc. (*personal interests*) and interest evoked by different aspects of the environment (*situational interests*). When children are provided access to interesting activities, people, and objects, and when their personal interests are used as the basis for involving them in everyday activities, they have opportunities to become engaged, use and practice their abilities, develop new competencies, and strengthen their sense of mastery. Parents and practitioners who are knowledgeable about creating and using situational interests and identifying and using children's personal interests can provide experiences that are likely to capture their attention, get them involved in everyday activities, and provide them opportunities to do things they like to do, practice things they are able to do, and learn to do new things.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The preparation of this paper was supported, in part, by funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Program (OSEP) Research to Practice Division (No. H324M010055). The opinions expressed, however, are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of either the Department or OSEP. Appreciation is extended to OSEP for continued support of the development of the practices constituting the focus of this paper.

AUTHOR

Melinda Raab, Ph.D., is a Research Associate, Family, Infant and Preschool Program, and Investigator, Center for the Advanced Study of Excellence in Early Childhood and Family Support Practices, J. Iverson Riddle Developmental Center, Morganton, North Carolina; and Associate Research Scientist, Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute, Asheville, North Carolina.