

Play Schemas

Schema	Definition	What are they learning	Common behaviours
Orientation	The orientation schema involves children exploring how their body or viewpoint relates to objects or the environment. Children showing this schema are interested in changing their perspective or spatial relationship to things.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps develop spatial awareness. • Supports visual and vestibular development (balance and movement). • Builds understanding of how their body moves in space. • Encourages motor development and body control. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hang upside down from furniture or playground equipment. • Tilt their head to see things from a different angle. • Look at the world between their legs. • Climb high to look down from a height. • Lie on the floor to observe something from below. • Spin themselves or objects to observe motion and perspective. <p>These actions are ways the child is experimenting with gravity, balance, perspective, and space.</p>
Trajectory	The trajectory schema is about exploring movement —straight lines, arcs, drops, throws, and pushes. Children engaging in this schema are experimenting with how things move and what causes that movement .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cause and effect (“If I throw it, it falls”) • Physics (motion, gravity, speed, force) • Directionality (left/right, up/down, forward/back) • Eye tracking and coordination • Early math and science concepts (distance, prediction, speed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Throw, drop, or push objects repeatedly. • Run back and forth or spin in circles. • Watch objects fall (e.g. food from a high chair). • Push prams, carts, or toys in straight lines. • Launch items across the room (yes, even food!). • Wave arms or kick legs energetically. • Love watching vehicles, birds in flight, or things that go <i>whoosh</i>. <p>Sometimes, this schema appears as "naughty" behaviour (e.g., throwing things), but it's a natural part of learning.</p>
Rotational	The rotational schema is all about circular motion . Children are drawn to activities that involve spinning objects or themselves, and they may repeatedly explore how	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physics concepts like centrifugal force, momentum, and torque. • Cause and effect (e.g. “If I spin it faster, it goes longer”). • Visual tracking and motor coordination. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spin the wheels of a toy car instead of pushing it. • Turn knobs, dials, or keys repeatedly. • Use spinning tops, fidget spinners, or twirl ribbons. • Roll themselves on the ground or spin in circles.

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	<p>things move in circles or rotate on an axis. This schema overlaps with others like trajectory (movement) and orientation (body position), but has its own distinct focus on circular movement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance and spatial awareness (especially when spinning themselves). • Early understanding of gears, wheels, and circular motion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch the washing machine or ceiling fan intently. • Draw lots of circles or spirals. • Twirl hair or string. • Roll balls or cylinders back and forth. <p>These behaviours are not random—they're focused experiments with rotation.</p>
Containment	<p>The containment schema is when a child repeatedly explores enclosing, filling, and surrounding objects or themselves. It's about the inside/outside concept and understanding boundaries, space, and capacity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The difference between inside and outside • Concepts of volume, capacity, and fit • How objects relate to boundaries and limits • That things can disappear and reappear (object permanence) • Early engineering and problem-solving (e.g., how to fit something in a tight space) • Emotional boundaries and a sense of security and control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put small toys into boxes, bags, or cups. • Fill containers with sand, water, or other materials. • Crawl into boxes, tents, baskets, or under tables. • Build enclosures or fences around toys or people. • Wrap objects (or themselves) in blankets or fabric. • Create boundaries with lines, tape, or objects. • Obsess over closing lids, zipping bags, or tucking things in. <p>Even seemingly odd behaviours (e.g., putting food in shoes or toys in the toilet) can be signs of this schema at work—exploring where things <i>can go</i>!</p>
Enveloping	<p>The enveloping play schema is a fascinating aspect of early childhood development where children explore covering themselves or objects. It's closely related to the</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Object permanence – understanding that something still exists even when hidden • Transformation – how covering something can make it appear different 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrap toys in paper, fabric, or tape • Cover themselves with blankets, scarves, or clothing • Hide under furniture or inside boxes • Enjoy dressing up in multiple layers or oversized clothes • Wrap items in playdough or foil

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	<p>containment and enclosure schemas, but its focus is specifically on wrapping, hiding, and disguising things—either physically or visually.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cause and effect – “What happens when I wrap this up?” • Emotional safety – wrapping and hiding can feel soothing and secure • Language and symbolic thinking – e.g., pretending a wrapped box is a “gift” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use sand, mud, or water to cover things completely • Layer stickers or collage materials on top of images <p>They may also be particularly interested in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presents and gift wrapping • Costumes and cloaks • Puppets, envelopes, or nesting dolls
Transporting	<p>In the transporting schema, children are focused on the act of moving things—carrying, pushing, pulling, dragging, or carting items (or themselves). The joy isn’t necessarily in what they’re moving but in how they’re moving it and the process of moving it from point A to point B.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motor skills (lifting, carrying, balancing) • Coordination and body control • Spatial awareness and understanding of distance • Cause and effect (“If I move this, what changes?”) • Organizational thinking (“Where should this go?”) • Problem-solving (“How can I move all of these?”) • Foundations for math and science concepts like mass, volume, and force <p>It also satisfies a need for order, purpose, and autonomy—they’re creating systems!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carry toys or objects around in bags, baskets, boxes, or buckets • Fill containers and move them across the room or outside • Push prams, carts, wheelbarrows, or anything with wheels • Transport blocks, stones, sand, or water from one area to another • Line up toys as if “in transit” or move them in repetitive patterns • Insist on carrying multiple items during cleanup or transitions • Love pretend play involving delivery, shopping, or construction <p>Even simple things like carrying handfuls of toys across the room and dumping them in a pile count as transporting play!</p>
Connecting	<p>The connecting play schema is a type of early learning behaviour where children are deeply interested in joining things</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination • Logical thinking and sequencing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love construction toys (Lego, Duplo, magnetic tiles, wooden blocks) • Use tape, string, or ribbon to tie things together • Snap and unsnap buckles or buttons repeatedly • Join train tracks, pipes, or road pieces together

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	<p>together — or sometimes in taking them apart. This schema reflects a child’s curiosity about how things link, attach, build, and separate, and it plays a vital role in the development of physical coordination, problem-solving, and early engineering concepts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding of cause and effect • Awareness of mechanical systems and structures • Concepts like permanence vs. flexibility (e.g., glued vs. snapped) • Early engineering and problem-solving skills <p>They're exploring how things can come together to make something new, and what happens when that connection is changed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stick items with glue, tape, or Velcro • Interlock fingers or arms with others • Build long chains or lines of toys (e.g., cars, animals, links) • Become very interested in zippers, laces, or knots <p>Sometimes they even create complex systems or "machines" with objects that are not meant to go together — their imagination drives the connection!</p>
Positioning	<p>The positioning play schema is a type of early developmental behaviour where children show a strong interest in ordering, lining up, arranging, or placing objects in specific, often symmetrical or repeated ways. It reflects their growing understanding of pattern, order, balance, and spatial awareness.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Order and classification (early math and science concepts) • Spatial relationships (e.g., near/far, next to, in front of) • Balance and symmetry • Visual pattern recognition • A sense of control, predictability, and calm • Early skills in design, logic, and problem-solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Line up toys (e.g. cars, animals, blocks) in straight lines • Group similar items together (e.g., all red toys) • Arrange objects in patterns (circles, zigzags, grids) • Spend time rearranging items until they “look right” • Show distress when objects are moved or knocked over • Set up mini scenes or displays (e.g., arranging dolls or furniture) • Stack or nest items in a specific order <p>They might not actually <i>play</i> with the objects in the traditional sense — the act of positioning is the play.</p>
Transformation	<p>The transformation play schema involves a child’s</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cause and effect (If I do this, that changes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mix paints or colours and watch new colours appear.

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	<p>interest in changing the state, form, or appearance of objects. This schema is about processes of change—how things can be altered, transformed, or converted—and it’s a key way children explore cause-and-effect and develop creativity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Properties of materials (solid, liquid, texture) • Process and sequence (steps in cooking, mixing) • Scientific thinking (hypothesizing and observing) • Creativity and imagination through transformation narratives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bake or “cook” using play dough or kitchen sets. • Pour water into different containers and observe changes. • Break sticks, crush leaves, or smash playdough. • Melt ice cubes or watch things dissolve in water. • Build structures and then knock them down. • Use sand and water to create mud or different textures. • Engage in pretend play about change (e.g., caterpillar to butterfly).
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