

Repetition in Children's Play

It is not unusual to find that the play of young children can be very repetitive. Whether it is playing ballet, house, firemen, in the sand, with collage, puzzles or blocks, most children begin kindly with a particular interest. This can be concerning to parents as they wonder if their child's experiences are limited, and how this impacts on their learning and development. Following are some thoughts to ponder with regard to this repetition in the context of the kindergarten setting:

- **Repetition in play serves many purposes** for children. It often provides a secure base from which to explore the physical and social environment and allows children opportunities to refine skills and ideas. It provides a sense of satisfaction in pursuing something of personal interest. As adults we often have particular activities that we are especially interested in and which we find difficult to leave until we reach a level of satisfaction or saturation – this experience is no different for children.
- Such focus on particular activities can also be viewed as beneficial to children as it enhances their abilities of **concentration and attention** to ideas or activities. This focus can be compared to the same focus which enables adults to pursue ideas and goals in study, work and leisure.
- The **opportunities for children to make choices in their play are limited** to outdoor and indoor play. It must be remembered that the larger portion of the kindy day is taken up with group, routine and transition activities directed by adults. From this fact two points emerge: 1. Although children may repeat a game each day at kindy, in the context of their whole day, they are doing many things: singing, dancing, participating in group games, discussing, listening to stories, taking responsibility at tidy up, using obstacle courses, relaxing etc; and 2. Indoor and outdoor play provide precious opportunities for children to exercise control in their lives, a rare but important psychological experience for children when so much of their time and activities are usually managed for them. Giving them this opportunity confirms that their ideas are valued and is important for their sense of competency and self esteem. These opportunities become even rarer as children progress through school.
- **Brain research** also tells us that: "In a cyclical fashion and because playful behaviour is usually pleasurable, children will repeat particular activities and are more likely to remember and learn from those repetitive behaviours. It is important to remember that it is through repetition that synaptic connections are strengthened, facilitating greater neural connectivity, which in turn means the brain can spend more energy on new learning (perhaps those conversations at group time) and the refinement of other synapses. In other words, practice not only makes perfect, it makes connectivity permanent." (Michael Nagel, 2012, *In the Beginning: The brain, early development and learning*.)
- This need for practice is particularly necessary with **social skills**. Co-operative play does not appear until sometime after 3 ½ years. The complexities involved in successfully playing with another person require skills of negotiation, communication, turn taking, conflict resolution, listening, and more. These skills need lots of practice! As children repeat those familiar and secure games, it allows for the practice and strengthening of synaptic connections which embed social skills.
- **When should we be concerned about children's repetitive play?** As early childhood educators, concerns arise for us when (a) children are unable to leave their game/activity to follow the daily routine eg to come to morning tea, (b) they find it difficult to change their focus to a group activity eg they only talk about spaceships even when we are discussing the petrified snake that we are looking at, or (c) they do not allow other children to use the equipment or space that they prefer for their game. In all of these situations, particular issues need to be addressed. Sometimes the

repetitive play is more about wanting to play with particular people and this too is a different issue to address.

- **Our strategies at Ballymore.** As a staff we value the opportunities children have to make choices with regard to their play. We have found that:
 1. When observing children's play, what appears to be repetitive often has subtle but significant differences from one play episode to another. These differences may include: who is engaged in the game or activity, what materials are being used, where the game has been set up and what is the script or storyline of the game. All of these factors impact on the complexity of the play from one week to another.
 2. There are many ways to incorporate different ideas or props in a child's repetitive play thereby extending their familiarity and engagement in other experiences. For example: the child who only chooses to do collage may be invited to make cakes for the bakery game, the aeroplane pilots may paint what they see from their window, the mothers may take their babies to the park to use the obstacle course, maps and plans may be drawn for builders or pirates.
 3. Our group discussions offer opportunities to share ideas about games, solutions to problems (eg how to make a spaceship) and new ways to use materials (eg making biscuits from stickle bricks).
 4. Seeing and participating in other children's games builds a reserve of possibilities for the future.
 5. And in some cases we have to wait until the passion or interest has run its course, or the developmental level has been reached which allows children to make more diverse choices. When we take over children's play or redirect them in an effort to widen their interests, we often find that the lack of personal relevance or meaning to them results in the activity losing its fundamental benefit. Eg: taking a child from the mudpatch to do a painting because we think they should, often results in a rushed application of paint to paper with the limited goal of pleasing the adult. In addition, redirection by adults has the potential to build up a reliance on adults for ideas when autonomy and self-direction are our ultimate goals.

Our approach reflects the national Early Years Learning Framework and its key principles of *Belonging, Being and Becoming*. *Belonging*: feeling accepted and valued regardless of developmental level, interest or abilities; *Being*: having the opportunity to engage in the play and activity of childhood and *Becoming*: being exposed to experiences that move development and learning forward at each child's individual pace.

Our advice to parents would be to: stay patient, and allow children time to engage in the experiences that are personally meaningful to them at this young age for the short period of time that they have – this opportunity will not come again.

Remember also that their days are full of a wide variety of activities and that we have a whole year to investigate all that kindergarten has to offer. At some point they will surprise you and all those experiences will lead to a new interest!