

# Play Patterns Unpacked

## Making Sense of the Why Behind the Play



### We All Use Schemas!

#### Developmental Overview

#### Notice, Name, Extend

#### Common Play Schema Categories

Transporting	Connecting	Rotation
Positioning	Enclosure	Trajectory
Orientation	Enveloping	Transformation

#### Inclusion & Equity Considerations

#### Notice, Name, Extend

#### Play Pattern Potential (Materials Focus)

#### Play Patterns as a Process (Common Developmental Scenarios)

#### Engaging with Families

### Learning Outcomes

Define play schemas, identify common schema categories, and recognize their role in how young children explore and make sense of the world.

Respond intentionally to children's schema-driven play by selecting and adapting materials, environments, and interactions to scaffold each child's learning journey.

Honor and nurture the deep learning happening through children's play by planning with a "Notice, Name, and Extend" approach, framing guidance through a schema lens, and communicating the value of schema play to families and colleagues.

### We All Use Schemas!

Schemas:

- are like mental maps or blueprints
- are structures to help us organize and interpret information
- help us make sense of new experiences



**Ah-Ha!**

### Developmental Overview

Infants & Toddlers	Repetition with Purpose	In order to ... understand the world through senses & movement
Preschoolers	Make Meaning Through Play	In order to ... integrate imagination & symbolism
School-aged Children	Shift from Physical Actions to Mental Strategies	In order to ... apply understandings to thinking, planning & learning
Teenagers	Apply Schema Maps to Increasingly Abstract Concepts	In order to ... support social & identity development
Adults	Apply & Evolve Existing Schemas	In order to ... navigate complexities in varying contexts



## Common Play Schema Categories



- Not a set of standardized categories
- Lots of nuance and overlap
- Familiarity with this group of nine will help strengthen educator's "Schema Spotting" muscles



**Ah-Ha!**

Play Pattern:	You might notice:	Ideas & materials for extending:



### Inclusion & Equity Considerations

- Schemas are particularly supportive to building knowledge when words don't come easily.
- Goal is not to stop repetitive behaviors, but to reflect and apply the insight they provide.
- Predictability is comforting. A sense of safety is essential for all learners.
- Children's culture and unique experiences inform play patterns



**Ah-Ha!**

### Notice, Name & Extend with a Using a Play Pattern Lens

- Notice: Use your growing understanding of Play Schema to observe Play Patterns in Action
- Name: Give language to what we see, naming the "why" driving the play
- Extend: Use this awareness to plan for materials, invitations, or experiences to meet children's schema needs and interests
- This framework helps shift our lens from 'How do I stop this behavior?' to 'What is this child working on, and how can I help them keep going, safely and purposefully?'"



**Ah-Ha!**

### Webinar Activities

#### Play Pattern Potential!

- Practice connecting materials to play patterns

#### Play Patterns as a Process

- Practice considering common early childhood scenarios through a Play Pattern lens



**Ah-Ha!**

### Engaging with Families

A Play Pattern Lens can support:

- Daily family communication
- Anecdotal notes to support child observations
- Partnering with families to notice Play Schema needs



**Ah-Ha!**



## Resources:

Play Patterns Unpacked: 9 Play Schemas Quick Reference		
IF THE CHILD LOVES TO...	SUGGESTED OBJECTS/MATERIALS	SUGGESTED FOUND MATERIALS
<b>Transporting</b> Use their hands, fingers, bodies, wheels, carts, or vehicles to move things from one place to another.	Small toys, blocks, beads, buttons, etc.	Small toys, blocks, beads, buttons, etc.
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### Play Schemas in Action

Connecting Children's Repeated Actions to Play Schemas

Notice - Name - Extend  
Reflection Guide

Blocks/Construction

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Children Observed: \_\_\_\_\_

**Notice!**  
What are the children doing? Look for repeated actions or play patterns.

**Name!**  
Connect the action to one or more play schemas.

**Extend!**  
How can I support development in this area? (materials, activities, books, projects, conversations)

### Play Schemas Quick Reference & Reflection Guide

Combined visual resource and reflection guide to support educators as they apply a Play Schema lens to their observations, teaching, and planning.

### Dear Families,

Have you noticed your young child bring up toys, leaving objects again and again, or missing everything from one room to another in a basket? These are just random behaviors... they're meaningful patterns of learning known as play schemas.

**What Are Play Schemas?**  
Play schemas are repeated behaviors children naturally engage in as they explore how the world works. They're a critical way children build knowledge through movement and repetition. Educators and researchers often recognize these behaviors as powerful tools for development - not disruptions to be managed, but windows into how your child is thinking and growing.

Some common play schemas include:

- Transporting:** Moving, dropping, or watching objects (and sometimes food!) move through the air.
- Transporting:** Carrying toys, blocks, or household items from one place to another using hands, legs, or wheels.
- Transportation:** Exploring how things change through moving, combining, or imagining one thing becoming another.
- Classification:** Exploring how things look from different angles or positions.
- Rotation:** Fascination with spinning objects like wheels or watching water swirl down a drain.
- Enclosing/Encapsulation:** Putting one object inside another, wrapping items in fabric, or thinking into small spaces.
- Connecting:** Joining items together - like linking blocks, taping paper, or stringing beads.
- Positioning:** Carefully arranging items in lines, patterns, or specific orders.

**How We Support Schema Play at School**  
In our classroom, we observe children's play closely to identify which schemas they're exploring. Then we thoughtfully design learning experiences that build on those interests. For example, a child in a transport schema might have access to ramps, wheels, and balls for safe throwing. A child exploring transporting might be offered carts or bags filled with natural materials to move and sort. We also talk with children about what they're doing to support language and social development. Rather than redirecting repetitive play, we aim to extend it in ways that deepen learning.

**How We Can Support Schema Play at Home**  
Observing your child's play schemas can help you better respond to - and enjoy - their behavior. Here are a few ideas:

- For Transporting:** Offer your child bags, boxes, or baskets to carry safe household items around.
- For Enclosing:** Let them wrap and unwrap toys, dolls, or even "food" in materials.
- For Rotation:** Provide access to toy cars, wheel games, or more opportunities to watch laundry spin! (Discuss what your child repeats often. That's usually the clue to what they're working hard to understand.)

**What's Next?**  
You can read more about play schemas by watching Becker's recorded webinar, *Play Patterns Unpacked: Making Sense of the Why Behind the Play* and in the *Classroom Guide*. And of course, reach out to us anytime - we're always happy to share more about how your little one is learning through play.

Warmly,  
(Your Name or Program Name)

### Play Patterns Family Letter Template

Editable template to support educators and program leaders in their communications with families.

### Play Patterns in Practice: Using Schemas to Teach with Purpose

In early childhood classrooms, play is never "just" play. It's language, logic, and learning all happening in real time. When a child can articulate "I, if you've ever noticed a child repeatedly putting cars down a ramp, they're up there in perfect formation, or creating order before again and again, you've witnessed play schemas at work.

Schemas are patterns of repeated behavior that reveal how children are making sense of their world. Understanding them gives us a window into their play, interests, and natural learning goals. Whether we call them "play schemas" or "play patterns," these insights help us partner with their play, connecting the dots between what children naturally do and what we know they're ready to explore next.

**From Theory to Play: A Snapshot of Schemas in Real Life**

First introduced by Piaget and expanded by early childhood thinkers like Chris Weale, schemas are the mental frameworks that children develop through physical action. They're the invisible threads tying together rolling, climbing, collecting, spinning, and sorting. Those of them as blueprints in the brain that get built through movement, trial, repetition, and play. Schemas lead! **Physical movement and repetition.** That's the engine of schema-building.

Explore some common categories of play schema below:

### Blog: Play Patterns in Practice: Using Schemas to Teach with Purpose