

# {Heuristic Play: The Lesson}

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As educators we have all watched with amazement the joy that the babies in our care have when we bring things like boxes and paper into their environment. They are completely enthralled with the sounds of the paper and the challenges of climbing in, out and through the boxes. Often times these boxes contained a new toy that may have taken several hours to assemble. However when you sit back to observe, it is the box and wrapping that the babies are most interested in. Does this sound familiar at all? This behavior is a form of play which is rooted in the natural curiosity that babies and toddlers have about their world and is known as heuristic play.

When educators provide babies with sensory play experiences they are assisting in fostering the connections being made in a baby's brain that lead to healthy cognitive development. These play sessions also give babies the opportunity to experience different ways to be creative and expressive in their handling of a variety of materials. A heuristic play session focuses on the opportunity for the infant to explore at their own pace while utilizing all of their senses. A "treasure basket", the term used to describe the collection of natural items, is just that, a low basket or another similar type of storage container where these heuristic play materials are kept.

Today's babies are surrounded by plastic. Every day we offer the babies in our care plastic - in the form of bottles, sippy cups, soothers and toys. While a plastic toy may do lots of different things and possibly make several sounds, it will always feel, smell and taste the same to an infant. When we provide infants the opportunity to explore a "treasure basket" we are providing them the opportunity to use and experience all 5 of their senses. The items in a heuristic play kit should contain items from each of the following categories; natural items, objects of natural materials, wooden objects, metal objects, and paper and cardboard. Please visit the following link for a list of possible items used in creating your heuristic play kit.

<http://tinyurl.com/heuristicplaycollection>



In November of 2011, I facilitated a workshop on heuristic play for the ECDA. One of the infant educators in attendance that day was Sandra Dennis from the Early Learning Centre at Holland College.

Sandra Dennis, ECE Holland College ELC, was very much interested in trying a heuristic play session with the infants in her care and later she shared with me that it had gone over extremely well with her wee ones. Sandra invited me to observe one of her heuristic play sessions at a later date and I was amazed at the engagement from the infants that participated. They sat happily for well over 20 minutes while exploring all of the natural goodies that Sandra had collected for her play kit.

I am pleased that Sandra has offered to share her experiences with heuristic play. Should you have any questions or be interested in finding out more about heuristic play I invite you to contact me at 368-6331 or [klmaceachern@edu.pe.ca](mailto:klmaceachern@edu.pe.ca)

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# {Heuristic Play: The Practice}

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When I am preparing to facilitate a heuristic play session, I think of the following:

- Set up the environment: I make the environment a calm, relaxing space by dimming the lights and playing soft music.
- Timing of the play session: The infants should be well rested and fed before beginning a play session, with adequate time for each infant to end the play session on their own.
- Amount and type of equipment available: *Touch*- texture/shape/weight; *Smell*- variety of scents; *Taste*- more limited scope, but I have used lemons, apples, pineapples and oranges; *Sound*- ringing, tinkling; *Sight*- color, form, length, shiny.
- Heuristic play items should consist of a variety of materials from natural elements, wooden objects, objects in leather, textile, rubber, fur, metal objects, paper and cardboard.

## Heuristic Play Sessions

I never leave the infants unsupervised at any point during a heuristic play session. They are within my reach at all times. The objects in my "treasure basket" are only used during heuristic play sessions. I want my infants to have ample opportunity to explore the various elements of the world. Some of the pieces in my treasure basket may be small. I will only set up for a heuristic play session with three children or less. I do not expect the infants to share items or take turns (this is why it is extremely important to have a wide variety of items). These sessions can be a great time for one-on-one with an infant. Heuristic play promotes skills of concentration, exploration and problem solving. The objects in my "treasure basket" are quite different from what I have in the learning areas of our environment.

A heuristic play session gives infants and toddlers an opportunity to explore objects they generally wouldn't

have a chance to explore. Each toddler begins the heuristic play session in one spot. As they see items they want, we encourage them to get the object themselves. If another toddler is using it, we direct them to another object.

I am aiming to have multiple counts of each object and various objects of all elements to explore. I will rotate the items each session to minimize familiarity of objects.

During heuristic play sessions, I engage with the toddlers when they look for it, and will offer descriptive words and state facts about the objects they are exploring.

If an infant leaves the heuristic play area, he/she may do so. However, all play items remain in the designated area. The infants may come and go from the play session until it is closed.

Infants and toddlers are not to be left alone and/or unsupervised during heuristic play sessions

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about heuristic play.

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