

Do ✓

Practice

Schema



Play in action

Understanding how children learn through repeated patterns

Every child has unique ways of exploring the world, testing ideas, and making sense of what they see. In early years education, these patterns of exploration are known as schemas; deeply ingrained, repeated behaviours that reveal how children think and learn. The Schema Play Approach helps practitioners recognise these patterns and respond to them intentionally, enriching learning rather than interrupting it.

We spoke to childminders Sarah Sharpe and Samantha Austin about the how Schema Play has benefitted their settings.

Discovering schemas through observation

Sarah's setting, nestled between her allotment and the seaside, is a place where children's curiosity and natural learning thrive. She explained that Schema Play shapes her practice and the learning experiences she creates every day.

Sarah explains that the children in her care were particularly fascinated with the trajectory and container schemas. "They would fill containers and sometimes their pockets with sand, toys, and water," she recalls with a laugh. "If they could get their hands on it, they wanted to move it or fill something with it."

Rather than stopping this repetitive behaviour, thanks to her Schema Play training, she recognised that she was witnessing meaningful learning.

To embrace this curiosity, she designed a new activity during outdoor sessions at her allotment and on the beach. Each child received three labelled containers: land, sea, and air.

The children were encouraged to fill the land container with soil or sand, the sea container with seawater, and then, in a playful twist, to "fill" the air container by running around the beach trying to capture the air. This sparked rich discussion about whether the air container was full or empty, how they could tell, and what "invisible" means.





Sarah extended learning by adding animal figures to a tuff tray alongside the containers. Deep conversations about which animals lived on land, in the sea, or in the air followed. Over the following weeks, the children continued to explore and revisit the theme, with Sarah extending their thinking to transport deciding which vehicles worked where.

Through this process, Sarah observed remarkable growth in language, mathematical awareness, and understanding of the world. *"The children talked about full and empty, height, depth, and whether things were inside or outside,"* she explains. *"They were using mathematical vocabulary naturally and showing real curiosity about the wider world, wondering, for example, whether there was 'land in other countries where lions and tigers lived'."*

The impact of Schema Play accreditation

For Sarah, gaining Schema Play Accreditation was a turning point. She wanted a deeper, more research informed understanding of how children learn through play. *"Schema Play gave me the depth I was looking for,"* she says. *"The training changed how I see play,"* she explains. *"Now I look at what children are doing and think about the why behind it. Even subtle actions like a toddler repeatedly putting toys into their vest or pockets, can show a developing container schema. Understanding that helps me plan experiences that nurture what they're already exploring."*

This shift has made her practice more responsive, more intentional, and more respectful of children's innate learning drive. *"I used to see pockets of behaviour; now I see patterns. I can extend learning rather than redirect it,"* Sarah says. *"Since adopting Schema Play, I've seen improved behaviour and engagement because children's needs*



are being met. They're exploring what fascinates them and that's when deep learning happens."

Seeing beneath the surface of play

Samantha Austin, another childminder who has trained in the approach, describes the perspective shift Schema Play has given her:

"Looking at schemas in play has completely changed the way I see children and their learning. Instead of just watching what a child is doing on the surface, I notice the deeper patterns behind their actions. I start to see the why."

She explains that behaviours that once seen as repetitive or disruptive now feel purposeful. *"When I look through a schema lens, everything feels more meaningful. A child throwing could be exploring trajectory; one constantly moving objects may be deep in a transporting schema. When I understand that, I can provide safe throwing materials, ramps, or baskets for transporting. I'm scaffolding their learning instead of stopping it."*

For Samantha, Schema Play made observation and planning more dynamic and compassionate. *"It shifts your thinking from managing behaviour to nurturing development. I see persistence instead of obsession, problem-solving instead of mess, deep thinking instead of randomness. Understanding schemas gives me clarity, patience, and direction."*



Why Schema Play suits childminders

The Schema Play Approach fits naturally within home-based childcare. Childminders have the unique advantage of closely observing a small group of children across varied contexts; the home, garden, local park, or beach, and can adapt resources instantly in response to what children are showing them.

Schema Play brings structure to these natural observations. It helps childminders understand patterns in behaviour, identify motivation, and plan environments that extend learning authentically. The result is not more work, but smarter, more focused practice.

Sarah's allotment, for instance, offers endless opportunities for schematic play: digging, planting, pouring, and transporting. The nearby beach extends those same schemas in new ways. Children see for themselves how the world connects: land, sea, and air literally within steps of one another. This outdoor learning is alive, embodied, and meaningful. It is learning that lingers because it begins with the child, not the curriculum.

A deeper way of seeing

Both Sarah and Samantha describe Schema Play as transformative because it honours the child's own curiosity as the true curriculum. It encourages

practitioners to see every repeated action not as a habit to manage but a window into developing thought.

As Sarah puts it, *"Schema Play gives me the key to understanding how children tick. Once you know the why, you can meet them where they are and help them grow from there."*

For childminders, that understanding turns everyday play into a continuous, joyful, and deeply informed learning journey one pocket of sand, splash of water, or gust of sea air at a time. CP

Resources

- To find out more about Schema Play Training: schemaplay.com
- In Coram PACEY's own Schema training course you can learn what schemas are and explore the theory behind schema and the links to frameworks, explore types and levels of schemas, all to support children's learning and development in your setting and at home. Visit the shop to find out more my.corampacey.org.uk/shop/product/schemas