# Infant thinking and theory-making: connections to frameworks and documentation

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| Planning for meaningful learning |

Whenever we think about planning for learning with infants, we must start with the frame of relationships. Everything is learned in the context of relationships with families, friends, educators and other children. Infants also embody learning through active relationships with their environment and the things they can see, hear, touch, smell and taste.

Infant educators are highly skilled at noticing what infants are interested in, what their ideas are and what sparks their curiosity. As the youngest children communicate their learning intentions in a range of ways, infant educators need to be keen observers with the ability to listen with all the senses (Rinaldi 2005).

We need to abandon our own intentions and feelings about things and instead allow ourselves to really notice – to be surprised. We are trained to be knowers, but the art of noticing is about being an *un-knower* and completely open to the unexpected.

With infants it is about noticing the very ordinary, split-second happenings – if you miss it, it may not happen again. This is not to say that we have to notice absolutely everything, but being tuned in to notice is much more important when working with the youngest children.

However, the infant educator’s job is not to simply look all day. The educational theorist John Dewey said, ‘Observation alone is not enough. We have to understand the significance of what we see, hear, and touch. This significance consists of the consequences that will result when what is seen is acted upon’ (1938, p. 68). It is important for infant educators to engage with theories of learning and development so that they can interpret and understand what they are witnessing.

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| What do infants need from us? |

We must acknowledge from the outset that we can never be certain exactly what another is thinking or theorising. It is important that we never become too certain and we keep reminding ourselves that our interpretations are speculations or guesses. But speculation may well be the most important thing we can do alongside infants of this age. We get in tune with infants when we really focus on what they are paying attention to.

We may need to pull ourselves back to avoid imposing what we would like to do or what we want the infant to know. Instead, we should pause, think a little longer, and trust the infant to show us what they want us to notice.

It has become popular in infant education and care to follow a particular formula for how to change a nappy or how best to feed a child, but to truly respect the capabilities of each infant, we need to acknowledge that the development of preferences and desires starts at a young age. If we are to acknowledge this, we need to allow the infant to show us what response they would like from us.

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| Seeing the difference between planning for activities and planning for learning |

The work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1999) and his notion of the ‘benediction’ can offer a frame for infant curriculum as an ‘invitation to encounter’. Levinas’ work provides a lens through which to view the immense capacities of infants to invite us into their learning encounter. We just need to trust that they will show us.

When we become skilled at noticing, we see invitations almost constantly. But we have to put our guest glasses on, not our host glasses. If we situate ourselves as the guest to the infants’ invitations, it shifts the role that we play. Rather than thinking about curriculum as a series of activities that we provide to children, noticing infants’ invitations enables us to see what they are interested in and how their theories might be leading their learning and provoking their thinking.

If we are to enter into a leaning encounter with an infant, it is important for us to understand a little about how infants learn. The book *Learning About Objects in Infancy* (Needham 2016) outlines the very fundamentals of how babies make sense of their world and the things they encounter. Infants learn much about their world through ‘statistical learning’ (p. 6), meaning that infants build a database of knowledge based on the patterns they observe. Infants watch, observe patterns, make sense of things and build up a knowledge of what things are and what they are used for.

The infant educator’s role in this encounter is not passive – it is highly active, both physically and intellectually. Our brains are trying to keep up with the infant. But we are also patient in allowing the infant to tell us what they want from us.

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| The conditions to promote creativity, theory-making and curiosity  in young children |

The environment is so important in setting the tone and enabling invitations. Begin by looking at the environment from the infant’s perspective. Some things to consider:

*Is the environment predictable?*

* Does the infant feel ‘I own this place; I know where to find things’? Is it organised and tidy enough that the infant can find their favourite things and get to them?

*If the infant is not yet mobile, how are they positioned?*

* Be thoughtful about what they can see and touch.

*Is this a calm place?*

* The infant should be able to be excited and active but also get some peace when needed.

*Are the things that are visible to the infant of interest?*

* Can they use things in interesting ways? The infant should be able to elaborate and change things as they see what is possible.

*Is the infant’s love of embodied learning catered for?*

* There should be places where the infant can use their whole body to feel and engage. Consider whether the infant can fit inside things, crawl through things or climb things. Can the infant rest their head for a micro-nap because they know where the cushions are?

Remember that infants can find the most extraordinary interest in the most ordinary objects.

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| What are some ways we might consider documenting evidence of children’s thinking to illustrate links to children’s learning and development? |

If we understand why we are documenting, it becomes not a chore but a joy to record and reflect on the absolutely amazing things we are seeing in children’s experiences.

*Why document?*

* Documentation helps us to be better educators. The act of capturing in writing and image what we are seeing helps us to see things in more complex ways. The threads of the learning begin to weave into a fabric where the patterns become clearer, the textures of relationships become easier to see and feel, and the inspiration of the children helps us to think about the next encounters.
* Documentation assists us to share this joy both with colleagues and families but also with children; older infants and toddlers enjoy hearing you read their stories and looking at photos of themselves and their friends.

*What to document*

If we are working with the idea of documenting encounters, we can find narratives a useful way of recording how infants encounter their learning. A narrative is a shared story of what is observed. We can go beyond simply what we see to speculate about what the infant may be learning or theorising. For an example of narratives see Cheeseman & Sumsion (2016).

One suggestion is to first write about the action you have seen, then consider what you think was going on inside the child’s mind – what do you think they were thinking and theorising about?

You can acknowledge that this is your thinking and that you can’t be certain, but this kind of speculation helps us to focus beyond what we can see and get to a deeper level of understanding of how we might support infants’ complex ideas and theories.

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| Final thoughts |

Let’s aim to have many more everyday conversations about what we speculate about children’s thinking and theorising, not being afraid to say, ‘I wonder if he …’ or ‘Do you think she is …?’ Let’s move on from being all-knowing to being *all-wondering*.

It is important to talk with families about an infant’s day and the functional parts of that day, but it is equally important to show parents that you are noticing their child’s unique thinking and how they invite us into their learning encounters.

#### This fact sheet was developed by Dr Sandra Cheeseman

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This fact sheet supports information contained in the April 2021 VCAA Twilight Webinar *Infant thinking and theory-making: connections to frameworks and documentation.* Edited vignettes of this webinar are published on the [Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority website](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/news-and-events/professional-learning/earlyyears-professional-learning/Pages/PastProfessionalLearningMaterials.aspx) for you to watch.

#### Additional resources that might be useful

Cheeseman, S & Sumsion, J 2016, ‘Narratives of infants' encounters with curriculum: The benediction as invitation to participate’, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, vol.17, no.3, pp. 275–288

Cheeseman, S 2017, ‘Narratives of infants' encounters with curriculum: Beyond the curriculum of care’, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, vol.18, no.1, pp. 54–66

Dewey, J 1938, *Experience and education*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York

Levinas E 1999, *Alterity and transcendence*, Columbia University Press, New York

Needham, AW 2016, *Learning about objects in infancy*, Routledge, New York

Rinaldi, C 2005, ‘Documentation and assessment: What is the relationship?’, in A Clark, AT Kjorholt & P Moss (eds.), *Beyond listening: Children's perspectives on early childhood services*, The Policy Press, Bristol, pp. 17–28

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