Three to five is a wonderful age for children because that's when we see them consolidating a lot of their fine motor skills, and not just fine motor skills, you see a real surge in their cognition. They learn about their body, so where my body is in relation to space. They learn about imagination, they learn several concepts at the same time, as well as the gross motor skills. So keeping in mind the holistic development that's occurring at three to five years of age, it would be really important to consider, "This is where the child is. I can use all of these elements when I plan play with them."

I would like to refer to the work of two researchers in play that I often read about. One is Susan Knox, and one is Karen Stagnitti. And they talk about play in reference to four different things. So one is space management, one is materials management, one is pretend play, and the fourth one is participation. So looking at those four elements, when we plan play experiences for children, and of course where they are in this stage in development. So they are cognitive, they have really good imagination now. They are developing friendships, they are able to expand.

So, we call them scripts and sequences in their play. So they will be able to have complex sequences like it'll be a dinosaur is building a whole empire, and they'll go into, "This one does this, and that one does that," and it'll be a very complex story with a lot of multiple sequences. So in that way, the way you would set up is what kind of space management do I need. Now, they're very good at body in space by this time. So, they can actually manoeuvre themselves quite well. So you might set up some obstacles or a variety of textured flooring, and then you might expect them and they will do it quite well. They love a challenge at that age.

So, thinking about those things. So in your space management, you would set up a variety of things that they are able to manage the spaces. In the materials, again, thinking about what kind of materials you might use. They like a variety of materials. So what happens is when you make it so varied, the experience, it's actually quite enriching for their development. They start thinking more, going more into cognition, going more into that imaginary play or the pretend play that we want them to use. And for all of that, they need quite good and developed fine motor skills and gross motor skills.

So if you set it up in that way, and I'll give an example very soon of how you could do that in your own setting. And then, the last thing is participation. So never forgetting that children don't like... They more innately want to relate and work together and play with others. So if you think of an example there in your childcare centres or in your early learning centres, thinking about setting up something like a restaurant, for example. A scene like that, and you can think about how for a three- to five-year-old, you can have a variety of experiences embedded in a single activity like that.

So you can have children moving furniture, setting it up. You can have someone writing down a menu. So, "What would you like?" So even if it's pretend, it's giving them some fine motor skills there. They can have a little register where they're typing things. They can cut out things and prepare the table. They can cook some things. So again, you're using a lot of cognitive, but also a lot of fine motor skills. And then, they can have dress ups so that they are dressing themselves and learning how to do. They can be a chef, or they can be a waiter or whatever it is.

So a simple activity like that can go a very long way in learning those fine motor skills. Not just fine motor skills as you can say. It's not just drawing and writing because that's something we need to really get away from, that fine motor skills is equal to drawing and writing. But it's a lot more in their holistic development. Now, things to remember is children learn to grasp with their full hand, then their fingertips. Then they learn to release, so they let go. Then they learn to isolate their fingers. They learn to use fingers separately.

So if you can see that they're not doing any of those skills using play, using materials, using intentionally set-up activities, even songs like Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star or where they have to make a diamond or Incy Wincy Spider, all of that encourages them to use their hands and it's engaging. Setting up things like the work benches, kitchen play, cooking activities. Again, being mindful of, we do a lot of threading. So we call that bimanual play, where one hand does one thing and the other hand does something else. So one hand holds, and the other hand opens a lid. So having little jars set up, cooking activities set up where one hand is holding, the other is mixing.

So, being mindful that those experiences are shared between all the children, and everyone has a chance to participate. Then doing things like water painting, sand painting, not just on the tabletop, but outside as well. You can take fine motor skills outdoors, and practise lots of things outdoors. And I go back to the point that the hands are the lead to learning and the lead to those academic skills that are coming in the years ahead. While the Victorian Early Years Learning framework talks about the different outcomes, it doesn't mean that we don't have to intentionally set children up to achieve those outcomes. I think that's where we feel like, "No, this child just loves playing outside. So, let them just play outside." That's not following the child's lead.

It is also our responsibility to extend and expand, so that the children can achieve all the different outcomes that we want them to achieve. So if a child regularly loves outside time and never engages inside, in indoor activities or in tabletop activities, which could lead to fine motor skills not developing as much as others, what can we do? So we can set up a restaurant outside, and here you've got a really great example of how you can extend those skills, achieve your outcomes as well, with every child.

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