



Heuristic

Adjective - “enabling a person to discover or learn something for themselves.”

Have you ever experienced a specific moment with your child where they’d rather play with the box that a new toy has come in rather than the toy itself? Or even another everyday object over a new toy? If you have, this is what is known as heuristic play.

What is heuristic play

The term “Heuristic Play” was coined to describe the interaction of babies and children with everyday objects – not toys.

Today, children are surrounded by loud, colorful toys that tend to be made out of plastic and while these might be good at stimulating some of the senses, they tend to lack the sensory and heuristic properties critical for supporting creative thinking and problem-solving skills.

With heuristic play, this involves the sensory exploration of ‘everyday items,’ anything from some rice or pasta or a wooden spoon to a piece of string or sticks from the garden. The difference between this and playing with toys is that toys are often limiting in what they can do, meaning a car is meant to be rolled back and forth, while heuristic play with any household object allows your child’s creativity to take over. Having an open-ended object to play with stimulates innovation, creativity and imagination as your child discovers the ways the object can be used, all characteristics of which are essential to learning and development.

Why is heuristic play good for our children?

“Toys that do less, actually teach more.”

1. It stimulates creativity and imagination

Imagination leads their play with heuristic objects, rather than muscle memory taking over when a child knows that a noise happens when they push a button, open-ended play opportunities allow children to explore, learn and develop in a completely natural way.

2. It supports gross motor skills and brain development in infants and toddlers

Infants and toddlers require a variety of sensory exploration to support their cognitive growth and development. With heuristic play, they can do this on a much wider scale than with toys that may limit their abilities to develop.

3. It stimulates multiple senses and critical thinking

When a child pushes a button on a book and it makes a sound, they learn that this action makes that sound and that sound corresponds to whatever context is on that page. With heuristic play, children can make sounds from banging different objects together or knocking them against another surface. However, unlike the toy, this leads them to figure out the context for themselves – why did that make this sound? What would happen if I banged this item with a different item? All of these questions only come about by exploring and they are far more valuable later in life when our children need to develop certain skills such as innovation and critical thinking.

4. It promotes early mathematical conceptual learning

When a child is exposed to a variety of items that range in size, shape, weight and texture, the time they spend exploring only aids their mathematical conceptual learning. This doesn’t tend to happen with typical toys as the need to explore is lessened when they know what the toy is meant to do.

5. It allows children to gain an understanding of the world, encouraging independence

The mantra that “toys that do less, actually do more” is very relevant to heuristic play. It means that basic, everyday objects that we consider boring (or not toys) actually offer a world of possibilities to learn for our children. While they learn to play they also start to gain an understanding of the world around them, and more importantly, especially with children today, they learn that they don’t need much to self-entertain. It is through handling and exploring these objects that babies and toddlers begin to make their own choices and decisions and start to develop as people.

How can I encourage heuristic play?

To help support your child’s learning and development, all you’ll need to do is provide them with more opportunities for open-ended discovery.

At Tall Trees Kindergarten we fill a basket with heuristic objects of different sizes and textures and let the children discover them for themselves. Play is supervised but it is essential to allow children the freedom to choose and explore the objects without offering them the objects first. You can easily do this at home by filling a box with household objects such as egg boxes, measuring spoons, and metal pans and sometimes outdoor objects such as leaves and pinecones. Just remember to rotate them fairly frequently to encourage new and different learning experiences.