An Introduction to Adult-led and Child-initiated activities

An explanation of the terms ‘Adult-led’ and ‘Child-initiated’ activities – with practical Childminding examples
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The terms ‘adult-led’ and ‘child-initiated’ activities are used in the EYFS framework and many childminders may be aware of the concepts. Here we aim to shine some light on them in the context of childminding. This eBook starts by outlining what the EYFS regulations say about adult-led and child-initiated activities. It then continues with an explanation of the terms using practical childminding-related examples, based on a document produced by the Department for Education (DfE).

What it says in the EYFS framework

The requirement for a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activities is stated within the EYFS (2012) Framework (paragraph 1.9):

"Each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity. Play is essential for children’s development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems, and relate to others. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults"

The paragraph continues by saying:

"There is an ongoing judgement to be made by practitioners about the balance between activities led by children, and activities led or guided by adults. Practitioners must respond to each child's emerging needs and interests, guiding their development through warm, positive interaction"

It concludes with:

"As children grow older, and as their development allows, it is expected that the balance will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1"
So the regulations state you must implement each area of learning & development through planned, purposeful play with a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activities. Our eBook 'An introduction to the Characteristics of effective learning' gives ideas on planned, purposeful play. In this eBook we concentrate on what is meant by the terms 'Adult-led' and 'Child-initiated'.

Note: A document available from the Department for Education (DfE), although written under the previous EYFS regulations, gives many insights into adult-led and child-initiated play. This document, entitled 'Learning, Playing and Interacting - Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage' is the main external source of information for this eBook.

According to the DfE document, activities cannot be categorised into simply being either adult-led or child-initiated. Rather there is a scale, with two extremes at each end and a gradual transition from a focus on child-initiated to a focus on adult-led in between.

Source: Department for Education

At the extreme left of the scale, children instigate their own play. Although they are likely to develop their own games, play may not promote active learning nor build on their development needs. To the extreme right of the scale, highly structured adult-led activities may involve no play, and provide little opportunity for children to learn effectively through critical thinking. Adult-led and child-initiated activities that support the seven areas of learning and development sit between the two ends of the scale, away from these extremes; some activities will be more child-initiated than others, and some will be more adult-led than others, but all will be within the two extremes.
Child-initiated play

The DfE document argues that, although planning children’s play may stop it being child-initiated, childminders can plan for children’s play. By providing the space and the equipment, child-initiated play can be purposeful. For example you may put out a range of natural resources, such as wood, wool, leaves and stones, allowing the child to move to the area and investigate on their own. Once the child has had time to develop their own ideas you can, if appropriate, offer support and practical assistance whilst still enabling the child to take the lead.

The child may also want you to join in, if so then try to play on the child’s terms. For example if the child is playing cafés, ask to join in and let them decide which character you should be.

For very young children (for example ones that cannot yet crawl) you can still support child-initiated play other than just providing toys. You could allow them to take the lead and mimic their actions. For example get on the floor with them and when they roll over, you roll over too. Show interest in how they are playing with their toys and play with similar ones next to them, smiling at the child to show you are enjoying doing the same as them - but just don’t take over.

Adult-led play

The DfE document describes how there is also an important place for activities initiated by adults. It goes on to say that adult-led activities provide opportunities for introducing new knowledge or ideas, and for developing and practicing skills. These adult-led activities may not be considered play but rather playful. It includes focused activities with small groups of children as well as activities such as story times and singing.

Carrying on with our example of natural resources. A childminder may observe that a child shows particular interest in stones. An adult-led activity could be one in which you help children to stick patterns of pebbles onto card. Another activity (and one that I often do with my daughter) is for you each in turn to pick out a stone and give it a name, based on its characteristics, and then discuss if it is a happy or sad stone, whether it has any brother or sister stones etc.

Child-initiated play can also evolve into adult-led, but this should be a conscious development. Going back to an earlier example of copying a young child who is rolling (a child-initiated activity), you may decide to see if the child will copy you, perhaps by...
sitting and clapping, or bouncing slightly on your bottom. As you are now taking the lead and helping the child to explore new experiences, this could now be classed as an adult-led activity.

**Final thoughts**

Adult-led and child-initiated activities are on a scale and some activities will be either more adult-led or more child-initiated than others. All child-initiated activities require some planning but should allow the child to take the lead in play, with you supporting when appropriate. In contrast adult-led activities should be adult-guided and while maybe not considered 'play', should be playful.

It is likely that you are already providing a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activities within your practice. We hope this eBook has helped you to develop a clearer understanding of the difference in these types of activities. With this understanding, if you do tend to incline towards either extreme, you can realize this and plan a variety of activities that provide a better balance for the children in your care.
Sources


Department for Education (was Department for Children, Schools and Families at time or writing): “Learning, Playing and Interacting - Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage”. Crown Copyright, 2009

We hope this guide has been of interest.

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