



# THE UNIQUENESS OF INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

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## FOREWORD, BY FLISS DEWSBERY

I have had many conversations with practitioners about children's interests and how they are planning to support them. Many say that children are interested in things like 'Spiderman' or 'trains' or 'being outside'. When I ask so what are they learning I get met by silence or very generic things like running, jumping and colours. These conversations led me to think that the word 'interests' is perhaps misleading. I believe that children's learning is based on more than their interests it is about their motivations and their curiosities. I have asked a colleague to write a blog looking at the term motivation and how this can support us as practitioners to develop exciting and stimulating opportunities for children and plan to meet their learning and development.

## WHAT IS INTRINSIC MOTIVATION?

Intrinsic motivation relates to 'activities done for their own sake, or for their inherent interest or enjoyment' (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As a child, my brother was extremely interested to discover what was inside electronic devices and as a result, took anything and everything apart, much to the despair of our parents who were unable to put them back together. There was no explanation for why, just that he was motivated to see, know and try to make sense of how things worked...this, of course, is a reason in itself.





# THE UNIQUENESS OF INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Motivation theory has been around since the early 1900s (Freud, 1914, 1915) and since then theorists have been trying to explain the link between behaviour, what drives us and why. We can all pinpoint times in our lives when we have been motivated and, in my experience, this often correlated to what was going on in my life at the time.

## WHY DOES INTRINSIC MOTIVATION MATTER?

Children are intrinsically motivated to solve problems, challenge themselves and learn. In young children, this is often manifested through sensory exploration and a general sense of curiosity (Deci et al, 1985). As children grow and develop, I am always fascinated to see how much of their time is dedicated to their interests which becomes an internal drivers (Centre on the Developing Child ref at bottom of page). I can remember spending many hours as a child using every piece of paper I could find, crafting, displaying and role-playing being a greengrocer. My main interest was not the creation or role-play itself but I was motivated by the opportunity to use the many bespoke carrier bags that my father had given me because of his job. The drive I experienced was unique to me and warranted no reward apart from the satisfaction of being able to fill up those wonderful bags. It is only in my latter years I can reflect on the learning that took place as I made sense of the environment (the greengrocers) which also happened to include social interaction, communicating, sorting, weight counting and mapping skills to name but a few.

## GETTING TO KNOW THE UNIQUE CHILD

As I visit other settings and speak to practitioners there has been concern over children's behaviour and I wonder if the 'unique child' is no longer at the forefront of practice (EYFS, 2024).



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As we grapple with new drop-off and handover routines and increased numbers it is easy to lose sight of the importance of information sharing. Getting to know families in our setting enables us to understand a child's context and knowing each child's unique experience can open doors into their world of motivation and behaviour. If I know what I would like to achieve and am driven to do so, my behaviour is self-determined, creative and flexible. A lack of knowledge regarding children's interests and motivation can unintentionally lead to a lack of choice. This can bring with it overwhelming feelings of personal helplessness and frustration, resulting in what is perceived as poor or negative behaviour (Deci et al, 1985).



## INTRINSIC MOTIVATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In my early days as a practitioner, I quickly realised that for children to be able to respond to their intrinsic motivation the environment needed to be autonomous (Ryan & Deci, 2020). It took me slightly longer to realise that autonomy wasn't based on MY agenda or done in MY time and MY way. I was yet to discover that children are not intrinsically motivated to sit still, be silent and listen passively no matter how many mini-inputs, rules and regulations I was required to put into the day. As a result, I spent many an hour constantly tidying up and being frustrated with how resources were being used or treated and what once worked in the way of extrinsic rewards to control 'reckless' behaviour quickly lost their shine (Deci et al, 1985). As fate would have it, a new year brought with it a new cohort of 20 boys and 10 girls! There was a VERY swift rearranging of the environment based on conversations with families and observations. I took the brave decision to remove unnecessary equipment and activities with meaningless or pressured choices, allowing more free time, and ultimately created a more autonomous space to understand, acknowledge and respond to children's individual perspectives (Ryan & Deci, 2020). It was incredible seeing children take ownership of their actions and learning.





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## CONNECTING AND GROWING

As new challenges were facilitated, I began to see the children in my class tune into a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) persevering and showing a sense of mastery. Engagement was consistently high and boys who I had perceived as being hard to engage flourished. Taking the time to discover what motivates children brings a sense of feeling connected and belonging, not just with children. I will always reflect on that year with fondness and a couple of years ago a parent got in touch with me about contributing to a yearbook. After catching up on general life events his mother made this appreciative reflective comment. "You just got him and knew how to bring out the best in him, so thank you for that". The truth of the matter was that sharing intrinsic motivation through a home-school relationship was the key to everyone's success; parent, child and practitioner. The hours spent in the role play, woodwork and outside area (there was lots of hand-eye coordination going on) have resulted in a boy who "excels in tennis and rugby". Successes we can never predict are some of the most satisfying and journeying with the children who lacked self-confidence and sustained engagement made me realise the importance of acknowledging uniqueness.

## WHAT NEXT?

- Take the time to share information with the families in your setting. This may require you to rethink how this is currently done to ensure exchanges take place regularly.
- How are the resources in your environment used?
- How do you help children to succeed in following their interests?

## FURTHER READING

**Ferre Laevers** - Involvement and Well being (blogs and webinar to follow) - A process-orientated child monitoring system for young children

**Cath Arnold**- Schemas (blogs and webinar to follow) – Observing Harry, Observing Gabby, Understanding Schemas and Emotion, Schemas in the Early Years

**Chris Athey** - Extending Thought in Young Children: A Parent-Teacher Partnership.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-understanding-the-science-of-motivation/>



## LINKS TO EVIDENCE

The Education Endowment Foundation offers evidence and resources to support play based learning in the Early Years Toolkit

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/early-years-toolkit/play-based-learning>