Option 1: Planning with children — simple beginnings

At the beginning of the year, the kind of planning we do with children looks and feels very different from what you might see in my room at the end of the year. Before beginning to plan with children we consider the many competing factors that will impact on the initial success. We start by asking questions such as these:

- What experience have the children had with planning? Kindergarten will often be the first place where children have had opportunities to decide what they want to do without seeking adult permission.
- What social and cultural experiences do the children bring to kindergarten? Encouraging children to plan, make decisions and follow them through may not have had value or relevance in the home setting.
- How can we encourage quieter children? Some children may feel far more confident to share ideas than others.
- What are children interested in that we can use as a springboard for investigating?
- Which key question might stimulate children’s interest in a topic and help them to think about what they might like to do?
- Can we use a social situation that has arisen to help children learn how to plan collaboratively? This is often a personal challenge, e.g. sharing equipment can be a good place to start as it has personal relevance to the children and is likely to engage them.
- What processes will I need to model?
- Who can I get to help me? Modelling the process is made easier with several adults.

Getting started

We only start to plan with children once they are well settled, feel secure and are familiar with the routines. A simple way to start is to use some laminated photographs we have taken of the outdoor play equipment. We use these when talking to the whole group about the sorts of experiences we might try outside, such as a simple obstacle course. We use between five and ten cards to start with, so that the children don’t become overwhelmed or confused by the number of choices. Then we talk about ways that we could use the equipment, such as where we could set it up or how many children might be able to use it at once. Through this process, we have discovered that there are wonderful opportunities to use:

- positional language as we talk about where to place equipment — ‘Will the ladder go next to the hoops or hook onto the climbing frame?’
- directionality — ‘Where is the start, where is the end?’
- mathematical concepts in a real-life situation — ‘How many people can climb the ladder at one time?’ (Later in the year we make signs.)
- ‘staying safe’ strategies — Encouraging children to think through some scenarios, e.g. ‘What might happen if too many people climb at the same time?’
These photos are of equipment available at our centre. Encouraging children to take photographs of the equipment supports their interest in the planning process.

While the children are sharing ideas about what we can do, we draw a map on some butchers paper with simple pictures of the equipment. The assistant and I use questions to prompt the children to think about where we can start, which way we should go and how we will know where the beginning is. These few questions can lead into all sorts of visual literacy opportunities, with ideas for representing stop and start, arrows to indicate directionality and much more.

The planning process with the children is not a lengthy one, particularly at the start of the year. It probably takes about ten minutes with an assistant, and if children are not interested or restless, we might just have a small group. Generally though, this hasn’t been our experience. When we have finished the design we take the paper outside and attach it to an easel and then work together to help set up the obstacle course. This really helps children learn about negotiation and the importance of talking to one another, especially when carrying a piece of equipment together.

As the year progresses the maps become more complex and elaborate and we find that children want to take over the actual representation of their ideas by drawing the plans collaboratively. When this starts to happen we get a real sense of growing confidence and ownership. Sometimes towards the end of the year, we’ve had children who want to convey meaning through simple strings of letters, an arrow or a stop sign.

Some practical tips when starting out:

- Vary the pictures, introducing a few at a time, even removing a few for a while.
- Invite the children to take photos of new equipment for future use.
- Encourage children to photograph the designs each week or two and build up a kindy group book of plans. Children really enjoy referring to these and they can be very helpful for reflections with children.
- Incorporate other equipment into the play so that planning for outdoors isn’t just about the obstacle course, e.g. blur the boundaries between what is traditionally considered indoor or outdoor equipment.
- Once children are familiar with the process, establish this kind of planning as a small group activity done on the last day of the week ready for the next week.
- Set up an expectation that everyone will take a turn to plan and then think about who is keen or a bit nervous, what social groups might work together better, and look for opportunities to support new friendships through this learning opportunity.
- Create a book of plans with the children’s drawings.
Applying the planning process to other situations

The strategies mentioned in the example of outdoor planning with children can also be applied to other learning experiences in kindergarten. For example, a project developed last year when a child brought in their new bike. We talked at length about all the things that have wheels and all the forms of transport the children had experienced. Children sustained their interest in their investigation over several weeks so the assistant and I talked about taking the children on some trips by public transport.

We shared this idea with the children and brainstormed:

- Where could we go?
- How would we travel — by bus, train, car ferry or a combination?
- What would we need to take?
- How could we let parents know? Write an invitation?
- What could we do to stay safe?

The children asked lots of questions about what they could take, who could come and what would happen if they got lost, so we ended up with a wonderful range of possibilities to explore.

The key strategies to successful planning with children are:

- keep it short to begin with
- draw on children’s interests
- don’t expect that every child will want to be involved
- recognise that planning might just be for a few
- model planning language, e.g. ‘I was thinking we could … ’, ‘I wonder if someone could help me to … ’
- model respect for others’ ideas and praise contributions
- be prepared to change direction with planning and remain flexible to new possibilities.