How do I begin?

Start by modelling the planning process with children. Use an interest you have observed the children engaged in as a springboard for discussion. Often children will bring in objects of interest from home, such as a book, a favourite toy or an item from nature. Teachers may also choose to introduce a topic using a stimulus object, e.g. a bird’s nest, something from the local environment, or a letter in the mail. Invite children to share their knowledge of the topic and pose thought-provoking questions — ‘I wonder how?’, ‘What might happen if?’, ‘What could we use to?’ — to stimulate interest.

Record ideas and suggestions on a whiteboard or butcher’s paper, make a list of questions or create a concept web. Each of these tools enables ideas to be recorded simply, added to, or referred to over a few days. Representing children’s thinking in written form or through drawings also helps children to see that their ideas are valued and that writing and drawing have a purpose and can convey meaning. In addition, parents, families and carers can see the kinds of learning experiences the children are engaging in.

What process should I use when planning an emergent curriculum?

- Capture an interest (respond).
- Engage others (optional).
- Find out what the child/ren already know.
- Encourage the child/ren to represent (draw, tell, build, create, construct).
- Research (books, other people, internet) to find out more and to refine representation.
- Reflect with children.
- Document and share to engage others.

What about children who have had no experience in planning and making decisions?

Start small, model the process, scaffold and encourage attempts to contribute. For a child who is feeling very uncomfortable about making choices, begin by suggesting only a few options so that the process of making a choice and following it through seems less overwhelming. Encourage children to make decisions with a supportive friend. Monitor progress to ensure that the friend doesn’t initiate all the planning choices and that one child doesn’t rely too heavily on others. Sometimes additional time to think in a quiet space with a supportive adult helps the process of planning to develop in an unhurried and responsive way. Using displays and resource books can also help to ‘plant the seed’ for an idea or interest to develop.
How do I manage several competing interests?

It is possible to support several ideas and interests at once, depending on the availability of adult support, availability of resources and the teacher’s familiarity with topic content. If the interest focuses on a topic that you have no experience with, this can become a source for investigation with the children. It is important for children to understand that teachers are also learners and explore possibilities for finding out more information. For example, undertake a Google search, find library books together, invite a parent or community members to share their expertise. While managing several interests at once, it is important to monitor:

- the voices and ideas that are listened to most often
- which children may be overlooked in planning conversations and why
- those ideas that are not followed up and why. (Does it fit with your knowledge of the topic? Is it difficult to manage?)

It is very easy to follow up interesting and exciting ideas suggested by confident speakers. It is equally important for teachers to draw on their observations of children’s interests and interactions to follow up on the interesting and exciting ideas of children who may be uncomfortable about communicating ideas through a shared group experience, whether small or large in size.

What do I do when there doesn’t seem to be an emergent interest forthcoming?

While emergent curriculum perspectives draw heavily on children’s current interests, teachers also take an active role in introducing possibilities for exploration and investigations. Look at what the children have been focusing on, identify some skills that may need further development, consider aspects of the kindergarten program that you wish to introduce but haven’t yet focused on, and start from there. For example, introduce a new concept or challenge through conversation, a thought-provoking question, an item of interest or a new resource. Museum displays or a display emerging from a current interest will often get beginners started. The other advantage of displays is that often children become interested in aspects of the same topic and this leads to interesting discussions and shared research.

What do I do about a child who doesn’t appear to be interested in anything at all?

Look harder, observe carefully and talk with the child and your colleagues. Find out about the child’s current interests through conversations with family members, e.g. what does the child talk about in reference to the kindergarten day? What do they appear to enjoy, prefer, or use on a regular basis? Focusing on a child’s preferred play often enables teachers to ‘find a hook’ to support the interest. Sometimes simply adding some new resources, (e.g. a basket of scarves with the dramatic props, some polished stones or wood off-cuts in the block area, or introducing new textures to the collage materials) can stimulate new directions for play. A large cardboard box can invite many new possibilities for play.
How can I support an interest to develop when children attend a five-day fortnight program?

When children start an interest at the end of their kindergarten week and don’t return for several days, it can be difficult to maintain or reignite their enthusiasm. Some strategies that can help:

- If space allows, ‘cordon off’ work that has begun and help children make signs to request others to look but ‘please don’t touch’.
- Take photos or draw images of work in progress and pin these on a noticeboard accessible to children or add to their portfolios.
- Have a basket or shelf for a particular group for ‘ongoing’ projects. Keep research books, printouts of website information and partly finished work, with children’s names on items.
- Be flexible with the timetable; enabling children to continue to play with and explore an interest over longer periods of time supports deeper learning.
- Email photos of ongoing work or information to parents so that they can continue to talk with the child about their plans. Some parents will also help the children find more information.
- Accept that for some children, particularly young children at the beginning of the year, interests may be fleeting. Try to engage these children in new interests early in the week.

What is the teacher’s role?

Working with children using emergent curriculum involves much more than simply providing a range of learning experiences that stem from children’s interests or providing interesting materials and resources and assuming that play will develop.

Engaged teachers take an active, intentional role in the learning using a balanced approach that combines children’s interests and needs with systemic requirements to focus on the significant learning highlighted in each of the Queensland kindergarten learning guideline areas of learning and development.

What skills do I need to have to make this work?

Teachers require:

- flexibility to think through a range of possibilities for extending an interest and then being prepared to move in a totally different direction following sustained shared conversations with children
- patience to help children engage in planning; knowing that it takes time, practice, encouragement and commitment
- the ability to listen carefully and avoid interrupting the play — to let the children take the lead
- the capacity to recognise when to take a more active role in play and when to observe carefully without intrusion
- the ability to look for opportunities to extend, scaffold, challenge the play, and help resolve problems
- knowledge of significant learning in each of the Queensland kindergarten learning guideline areas of learning and development to recognise what they need to plan for, and to help recognise a learning opportunity when it arises
• skills to create a flexible routine and an environment that supports children to make choices and access resources
• enthusiasm for finding out new information with children using interesting questions and comments, e.g. ‘That is amazing … ', ‘How come … ?', ‘I wonder why … ?'
• confidence to articulate the importance and value of play-based learning to parents, colleagues and community members and gather their support for the program.

What opportunities do children need to develop the skills to make emergent curriculum work?

Children need opportunities to:
• talk — to discuss ideas, theorise, pose questions and reflect
• feel safe, supported and know that their ideas are valued
• develop confidence in their ideas and opinions
• engage in quiet play — to play collaboratively in small groups and to learn how to negotiate and work with others
• develop skills for managing conflict, and the resilience to manage new and unexpected situations.

How can I keep this process manageable?

Make time for reflection by yourself, with the children and with colleagues. There are a multitude of rich moments that may not need to be extended, made public or become the focus for an investigation. These are moments to celebrate children’s small successes: the joys of a simple discovery, a joke or a calm moment in the children’s play.

Simple strategies that make the process more manageable include:
• being organised and flexible in planning and decision making
• ensuring that the learning environment is welcoming, safe and inviting
• making sure the program is as well resourced as possible using recycled and inexpensive materials
• asking parents for contacts with companies that give away off-cuts of materials such as paper, fabrics and wood
• systematically documenting observations of the children’s learning
• regularly monitoring and reviewing the learning that is taking place to ensure that the curriculum content is incorporated into daily planning
• holding regular conversations with partners so that parental and community priorities are incorporated into the program
• prioritising what needs to be done and looking for ways to engage help from others.
How will I know when it is working well?

It will be obvious when an emergent approach to curriculum planning with children is working. There will be evidence of:

- changing flexible room organisation in response to children’s developing interests
- conversations happening between children
- conversations between children and the adults working in the room
- children making choices and offering suggestions
- documentation of children’s learning on the walls
- displays related to current areas of interest and investigation
- enthusiasm for finding out things
- children starting to revisit processes with minimal support from adults.

There will be an undercurrent of movement and interest rippling in the room as children and adults work together exploring new possibilities for learning.