

# Encouraging your child's strengths and interests

Issue No. 013

*I've always found fossils very interesting. I also had newts and grass snakes and frogs which I kept when I was a boy. I spent a lot of time in the garden exploring.*

Sir David Attenborough (naturalist, author, broadcaster)

What is your child good at? Some children are fantastic at throwing and catching balls. Some are wonderful at relating to babies, adults and other children.

What is your child interested in right now? And what might that lead to?

Does your child talk endlessly about trains or the Wiggles? They may have developed a fascination with brushes of all types (brooms, toothbrushes, hairbrushes – even street sweepers). Your baby might be fascinated by her reflection in the mirror. A five year old might want to talk about death after a family pet dies.

These interests might last days or months. Sometimes they'll seem obvious to you (perhaps you share an interest in football or dance). Sometimes you'll find the interest unusual (why brushes?).

These strengths and interests are an important way for your child to express their identity. It's their way of saying 'this is who I am' and 'this is what I can do! In some cases your child's interest might lead to a life-long passion

## I know all children are different – but I'm concerned about my child's specific interests

Many young children develop specific or intense interests; this is both natural and normal.

Some intense interests are due to your child wanting to use a new skill just because they can (Look at me – I can somersault at home and in the park and in the supermarket!)

But if you are concerned about a long-lasting very intense interest, trust your instincts and speak to your child's educator, doctor or maternal child health nurse.

## What does this mean?

- You can play an important role by encouraging your child's strengths and interests. But remember not to take over! David Attenborough's parents bought him aquariums for his snakes and frogs. But they also gave him 'a lot of time' to explore.
- Unstructured time is hugely important for children – they need to spend time exploring and experimenting.
- Listen carefully to your child and watch them play. Follow your child's lead. If your child wants to dress up, you might encourage the interest by searching for old clothes in the cupboard or visiting an op shop together.
- Keep your child's educators, family and carers informed of your child's

strengths and interests so they can support them too.

- Talk with your child about their strengths and interests and explore them together.
- Share your own interests with your child.
- There's no need for intensive instruction or formal lessons to build on your child's strengths or interests. If you do choose formal lessons, check that they are suited to how your child likes to learn, are age appropriate and that they don't pressure your child. If the lessons are for babies or toddlers, they should involve you.
- You can't force a child to have an interest. But you can expose them to a range of experiences, activities, objects and relationships. Children who are exposed to varied activities are more likely to develop a wider range of interests. Visiting and exploring your local library, museum, park, art gallery or zoo offers great opportunities to develop curiosity and interests.

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