



SCHEMAS

A practical handbook

STARCATCHERS IS SCOTLAND'S ARTS AND EARLY YEARS ORGANISATION.

For almost 15 years Starcatchers has offered inspirational creative arts experiences for the youngest children from birth to 5 and the grown-ups who care for them. Alongside a range of beautiful productions and immersive community work, Starcatchers' professional development and training programmes, Creative Skills and Playspace, focus on empowering early years artists and practitioners to tap into and implement creativity in their own settings and practice, ensuring the best developmental outcomes for every child.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND IN THIS HANDBOOK

Starcatchers' Wee Inspirations

are low-stress, accessible ways to enjoy creative, child-led play with very young children at home or in your early years setting. Each approach to schema-based play is a Wee Inspiration, all inspired by Starcatchers' Associate Artists.

Practical and creative ways to explore schema-based play with children from birth to 5.

1. Trajectory
2. Rotation
3. Positioning
4. Transforming
5. Enveloping
6. Enclosure
7. Orientation
8. Transporting
9. Connection

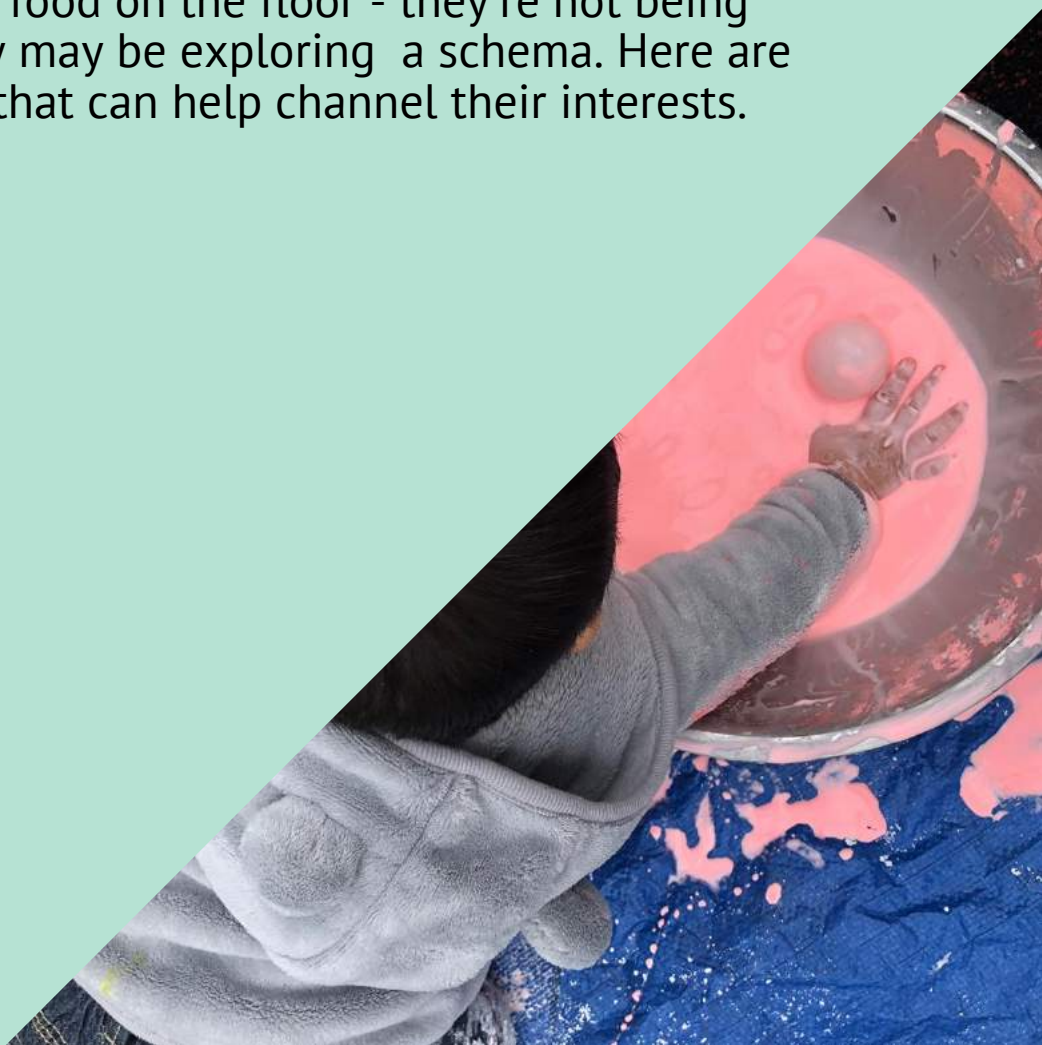
Three of Starcatchers' 5 Ways With... approaches that gives you a whole week of ideas with one resource! Find the *5 Ways With...* play ideas at the end of the booklet.

DISCOVER MORE
[STARCATCHERS.ORG.UK](https://starcatchers.org.uk/schema-resources)
[/SCHEMA-RESOURCES](https://starcatchers.org.uk/schema-resources)



**SCHEMAS ARE PATTERNS OF REPEATED
BEHAVIOURS WHICH CHILDREN ENGAGE IN.
THEY ARE A CRUCIAL PART OF
DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING.**

If your wee one loves putting things in boxes, or throws their food on the floor - they're not being 'naughty', they may be exploring a schema. Here are some ideas that can help channel their interests.



TRAJECTORY

IF YOUR WEE ONE...

- Throws toys instead of playing with them "properly"
- Loves dropping things - spoons, food etc
- Moves toys or objects in straight lines - side to side, forward and back, up and down
- Is fascinated with running water
- Loves jumping off furniture

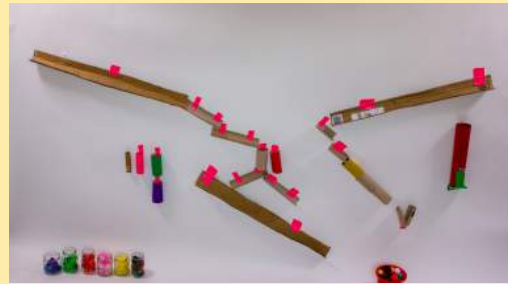
THEY'RE EXPLORING THE TRAJECTORY SCHEMA



Water For a less messy way to explore water moving, get outside! Grab a squirty bath toy or clean medicine syringe and some water. Wee ones can explore how far the water will fly whilst also drawing on dry ground (or watering the plants!).



Explore obstacles Whether you're at home or out and about, find obstacles to explore. Encourage your wee one to assess risk, e.g, chatting about how stable their footing is, how landing on grass/cushions is safer than concrete. Channeling their need to climb and jump works so much better than trying to stop them.



Dropping Dropping items from different heights is a common pattern and helps your wee one understand gravity and weight. Why not drop soft toys from a height, build a pom-pom run, or take biodegradable confetti on your next walk?



Throw something soft! If your wee one is really into throwing things, why not move together? Floaty scarves or feathers are a great way to throw things and move together without risking breaking something!



Get dramatic! Part of the trajectory schema is also about moving up and down. Use some imaginative play and drama to make jumping and climbing more engaging and more focussed!

ROTATION

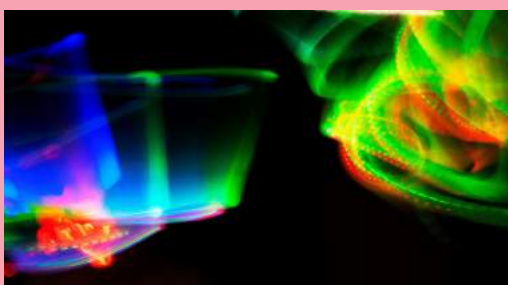
IF YOUR WEE ONE...

- Loves spinning around on the spot
- Is fascinated by spinning the wheels of toy cars or toy steering wheels
- Keeps twirling the taps to turn the water on
- Makes swishy circles in their food, or paint, or anything they can get their hands on

THEY'RE EXPLORING THE ROTATION SCHEMA



Patterns Mandalas are circular patterns that rotate outwards from a centre point. Gather objects together and make it as small or large as you like. If you leave space between the layers your wee one may enjoy following the different circles within the design, or they may want to stand in the middle and spin.



Light Painting This works the same way as trying to write your name with a sparkler on bonfire night! Download a free light painting app on a smartphone and move around holding torches to create amazing digital art. You can make twirling shapes or for older children try writing some letters.



Spinning This is one of the most common ways that wee ones engage in the rotating schema, but why not take it a little further by involving some props? Scarves are great for encouraging movement. [Try: 5 Ways with... Scarves](#)



Water Floating plastic balls or bowls in water gives loads of opportunities for spinning! If you use metal bowls with a stick, this is also a great way to explore making music and exploring sound together. Explore this as part of bath time, or if you're worried about your bathroom getting splashed, take the fun outside.



Slow down For babies, or wee ones who need some quiet time, explore tracing circles and spirals on their back or tummies, and invite them to do the same to you. This is a great way to practice gentle touch.

POSITIONING

IF YOUR WEE ONE...

- Places toys in neat rows instead of playing with them "properly"
- Has strong feelings about who sits where
- Prefers food presented separately instead of mixed together
- Enjoys patterns and grouping similar objects together

THEY'RE EXPLORING THE POSITIONING SCHEMA



Sorting Items like pom poms are great for sorting by colour, but you could find use any other small object. Find them together and sort them by shape, colour, pattern or material!

[Try: 5 Ways with... Pom Poms](#)



Mandalas Mandalas are large circular patterns. Gather items to make a piece of art - natural materials like stones, leaves and sticks can be great for this. Start a centre and radiate outwards in a circle - once your wee one gets the idea you'll be amazed how often they start building their own.



Scavenger Hunts How many things in your house can you find that are pink? Go on a scavenger hunt for objects that have something in common, then let your wee one position everything the way they want to. This is a great way to chat together about shapes, colours, numbers and size.



Stacking Creating piles or towers of objects can be a great way to explore positioning too. Blocks or stacking cups are the most obvious examples, but your wee one might enjoy the challenge of natural objects like sticks or stones when out and about. Or what about stacking dishes in a dish rack?



Move together Positioning can also be learning about how to move our bodies together - try mirroring their movements, matching body parts and letting your wee one take the lead.

TRANSFORMING



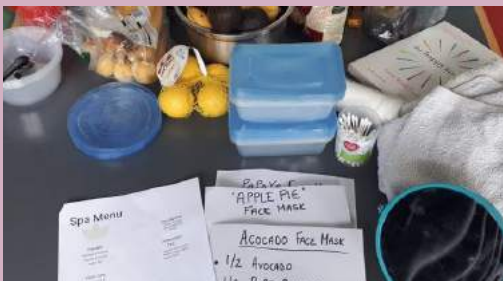
IF YOUR WEE ONE...

- Mixes all the colours of paint into brown
- Tries to pour water onto their food (or put food into their drink)
- Loves mashing and mixing
- Spends ages at the beach mixing sand and water (or knocking down sandcastles!)

THEY'RE EXPLORING THE TRANSFORMING SCHEMA



Magic Potions Wee ones love mixing together their own potions. Using store cupboard ingredients is great for wee ones who still like exploring everything with their mouths, or once they're past that stage you can go hunting for natural resources to mix together. Food colouring is a great non-toxic way to explore colours.



Spa day Create your own (edible) face masks using things like oats, bananas, avocado, yoghurt and coconut oil. Let your wee one squish soft foods with their hands and chat about the way ingredients are transformed as they mix together.



Dough Creating your own dough is great for sensory play, but it also helps wee one's understand how mixing things can change them into something new. Let them experiment with the ingredients - the mixing and testing may be more important to them than creating the "perfect" dough model.



Smashing! Chalk is a fantastic resource because it can be turned from something solid into something else. Smash it, make your own putty, draw with water, or change it into dust with sandpaper! [Try: 5 Ways with Chalk](#)



Imaginative play Think about transforming every day objects. What else could a cup be - a hat? a telephone? Act out some ideas and make sound effects and faces together!

ENVELOPING

IF YOUR WEE ONE...

- Loves covering their face, head or body
- Keeps hiding under blankets
- Loves wrapping up objects or themselves
- Covers the entire paper in paint
- Uses mud, paint or whatever they can to coat every bit of their hands

THEY'RE EXPLORING THE ENVELOPING SCHEMA



Hiding For an upgraded take on hide and seek, take turns hiding toys around your home or garden - you can take photographs of hiding places to give each other clues. For wee ones who aren't mobile, placing different objects on a tray and covering them with a cloth can be fun too.



Messy Play For wee ones that explore everything with their mouths, messy play with food can be great (custard, cornflour gloop, cooked spaghetti) - have enough in the tray/bowl so they can bury or coat their hands. If you're stressed by mess, plan the activity just before bath time. Or try a tray of dry rice, lentils etc.



Wrapping Use a light scarf or muslin cloth to wrap up every day objects to be discovered. Using cloth makes it easier for wee ones to wrap or cover objects themselves, so they can take ownership of the game. Expect LOTS of repetition and ask "I wonder what else we could wrap?" to keep their imaginations working.



Covering Use blankets or scarves to cover or wrap each other. This could be a calm activity to wind down together where you "tuck" each other in. Or you could create a game. Why not run around as ghosts together? Or make your very own maypole?



Visual Art Collage with stickers, paper, glue, paint, anything that can be used to completely cover the page is ideal. Or get outside and use leaves, stones, sticks and other natural objects to cover the "canvas".

ENCLOSURE

IF YOUR WEE ONE...

- Loves creating barriers or frames - this could be with train tracks, blocks, or even by pushing their food to the edges of their plate
- Puts everything in boxes or containers
- Insists on standing inside any circle, square or defined shape they see on the ground

THEY'RE EXPLORING THE ENCLOSURE SCHEMA



Chalk Walk Take some chalk for a walk and draw around things you find, chatting as you go. On rainy days you can even draw round the edges of puddles! Chalk shapes like circles or squares big enough to stand inside and see how your wee one decides to play with them - I wonder what could they be?



Jail Break For older children, find a way to "trap" an item that lets children explore how to get it out. A great way to do this is use rubber bands around a bowl filled with small items. They might then want to see which items they can get back inside the bowl again.



Build a den Dens are great for building an enclosed space together and escaping the world - get under a table, use sofa cushions or create a den outside. Once your den is built, why not bring in some books, stories, torches or sensory objects to explore?



Frame it! Next time you're outside, or during your walk, collect sticks to create a frame and use stones, flowers, leaves and anything else you can find to lay out in your own piece of transient art! Remember and ask your wee one if you can take a photo of their work - it shows you value what they've made.



Tidying Up Put a large box, basket or hula hoop in the middle of the room, and pretend it's a hungry monster - that love of enclosure might just get your house tidy!

ORIENTATION

IF YOUR WEE ONE...

- Hangs upside down at every opportunity
- Loves climbing as high as possible
- Randomly lays their head down (or even fully lies down) even when they're not tired
- Wants you to dangle or flip them upside down

THEY'RE EXPLORING THE ORIENTATION SCHEMA



Use the weather! Wind changes how objects move, offering wee ones opportunities to see objects in different ways, move them around and learn from touch. Lie down underneath washing that's drying on the line, or run or crawl under a rug or scarf that someone is flapping.



Get down Getting down to your wee one's level is a great way to explore perspective, whether that's crawling, rolling or just lowering yourself to their height, you'll learn a lot about how they move and see the world! They may also love sitting on your back - another chance for a new perspective!



Upside down! Being upside down is actually a crucial part of developing the vestibular system (our sense that tells us where we are in space). Explore being upside down together through making tunnels with your bodies - lean against a wall or let them crawl through your legs if you're not ready for handstands!



Mirrors For babies, mirrors are a great form of sensory play that help them understand themselves from different angles. They're also great for learning (and playing with) facial expressions. Hang mirrors at their height, hold a handheld mirror above them, or peek at yourself in the mirror between your legs.



Empathy Orientation can lead us into conversations about point of view, and how we all see things differently. Use movement, photography and imagination to explore how an ant, an eagle or another animal might see the world.

TRANSPORTING

IF YOUR WEE ONE...

- Loves prams, wheelbarrows or dumper trucks
- Fills bags or boxes with objects and insists on carrying them around
- Always wants to pick up fistfuls of stones, food or whatever they can grab, and doesn't want to let them go

THEY'RE EXPLORING THE TRANSPORTING SCHEMA



Water Play around with how to transport water around in different containers: bowls, cups, sieves. Take it outside to explore what patterns the splashing water makes on different surfaces, or ask your wee one to carry water to different plants, or to "clean" different bits of the ground.



Confetti Walks Give your wee one a bag of biodegradable confetti or bird seed to scatter along their way when out for a walk or in the garden. Or gather small seeds, petals, bits of grass and other small natural objects as you walk along to create your own nature confetti.



Mini Worlds Next time you're out for a walk, let your wee one pack a bag of small toys, and stop along the way to find new places for the toys to explore. Even grass becomes a jungle when you're tiny! Or encourage them to gather natural objects to explore once you're home again.



Delivering Once wee ones are on the move, they often really enjoy taking objects from one side of the room to the other, or handing them to someone else. Use your imaginations - they could be delivering letters, giving out presents or even finding and sharing treasure!



Stories Take a story for a wander by bringing some props in a bag with you. Let your wee one carry the bag and pull out each item as it pops up in the story - this is great for wee ones who don't like to sit still!

CONNECTION

IF YOUR WEE ONE...

- Loves Lego, jigsaws or toys that fit together
- Uses tape, glue or string to stick all kinds of things to each other
- Wants to stick all the different coloured playdough into one big lump

THEY'RE EXPLORING THE CONNECTION SCHEMA



Fancy Sticks You can decorate a stick by wrapping, gluing or taping ribbons, wool, lengths of paper or fabric around it - this could be a magic wand and inspire some imaginative play. Or tie on materials and find ways to move with the loose ends flapping and swirling in the air.



Knots For wee ones, fabric is often an easier way to start tying knots or connecting things together. Scarves or small cloths are great for making a long chain.



Bungee Balloons Using rubber bands and some knots you can turn a balloon into a bouncy ball, or hang them so babies can play with them whilst lying on their back. [Try: 5 Ways with... Rubber Bands](#)



Connecting Bodies Suggesting different ways your bodies can connect can be a fun game- arm touching arm, head touching head, knee touching shoulder! Really tune in to your wee one and use this as a chance to practice gentle touch.



Get building! Dens are a great way to explore multiple schemas at once - this could enveloping and enclosing as well as connection. They're also a great way for wee ones to explore connecting items together and solve problems - clothes pegs can be a great way for wee hands to join different bits of cloth.

**5 WAYS WITH... A
WEEK OF IDEAS
WITH ONE
RESOURCE**

5 WAYS WITH... POM POMS!

1



Sorting Can you sort the pom poms by colour? By size? Can you place, throw or roll them into groups? This is a great sensory play experience that builds the foundations of numeracy and counting.

2



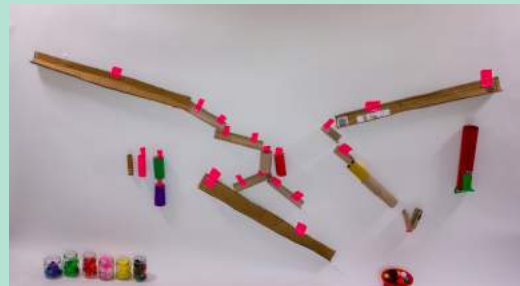
Make it rain! Fill an umbrella, a bowl or cup and scatter the pom-poms from above. How many can we catch? What does it feel like as they fall on us? What happens if we twirl as they rain down? A fun whole body creative experience with lots of chances to chat.

3



Pom pom people Using clothes pegs to grab some pom poms is great fine motor exercise...and then you have your own pom-pom people! Do different colours or sizes have different personalities or voices? Add faces if you like, using stickers or pens.

4



Pom pom run Cut toilet rolls, wrapping paper centres or long tubes in half and let your wee one tape them up on a wall. Explore which angles are best for rolling pom poms down, build tracks or use paper to create 'doors' at the end.

5



Get stuck in! Use some sticky back plastic or loop sticky tape to create a sticky 'canvas' to let wee ones create their own pom-pom art! Windows, curved surfaces or mirrors add extra challenge and interest.

AND REMEMBER...

Start with where your wee ones' interests are and gradually move into other, less familiar ways of exploring - once they 'know' pom poms are fun, they're more likely to stay engaged. Rather than telling them what to do, get stuck in yourself and pause sometimes to wonder aloud, or ask for help.

5 WAYS WITH... CHALK!

1



Smashing! Wee ones are often fascinated by dropping chalk and watching it break - embrace that curiosity and explore different ways of smashing chalk! Hammers, kitchen equipment, rocks, explore what works best. Is it art or is it science? Who cares, it's fun!

2



Chalk Putty Sweep up your smashed chalk dust and mix it with water to make a chalk putty you can shape like dough - another great sensory activity that's eco-friendly and can be explored inside or outside. What happens if you leave it outside for the rain?

3



Chalk Walk Next time you go for a walk, take some chalk with you. You can turn shapes on the pavement into faces or creatures, draw obstacle courses or just ask "I wonder what this could be?" It's a great way to combine imaginative play with mark-making.

4



Water Prints Once you've got some chalky ground you can play with water to make marks and patterns. Drop, scatter or use a wet paintbrush to make marks. Or you can try printing with your hands, feet, natural materials or any objects lying around!

5



Super Chalk This is great for wee ones who may struggle to use chalk on other surfaces. Tape down sandpaper and use it as a super-scratchy sensory canvas that makes chalk lines easier to make and more visible. Chat as you play, comparing different surfaces.

AND REMEMBER...

Photos are a great way of "keeping" the temporary art your wee ones make, but don't get lost behind the camera! Be in the moment and be led by what interests them. Saying "I love what you've done, can I take a photo?" at the end is a powerful statement to show you value their creativity.

5 WAYS WITH... SCARVES!

SCARVES ARE AWESOME!

Scarves are an amazing open ended material that are fantastic for encouraging movement. Have you seen anyone pick up a scarf and not want to give it a twirl? Here are some ideas to get you started playing with scarves, and check out the video online for even more ideas!

1



Waving A scarf in the air is a great way to inspire movement - the focus is on the scarf, and your body follows. Spinning, swooping, tracing shapes or writing your name - you'll be amazed at how easy it is to get moving.

2



Covering See through scarves are excellent for Peek-a-boo - they're super light which makes it easy for babies and very young children to move them. Once you've both mastered taking the scarf on and off, try swapping or sharing - mini tent for two heads, anyone?

3



Catching Throw a scarf in the air and watch it float down - work on that whole body coordination and try catching it on your hand, or foot or head. Or can you throw your scarves in the air and swap with someone else before they land?

4



Imagining Your scarf can become a tail to turn you into a horse, or wings for a bird, or even the spinning blades of a helicopter! See where your imagination takes you and find all the different ways your bodies can move when you start pretending to be something or someone else

5



Cleaning Bundle your scarf up and use it to gently "clean" the floor, your own body, or even each other. This can be a great way to start winding down and discuss different kinds of gentle touch (tapping, stroking etc) after a lot of high energy movement.



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