



Developing Theory of Mind in the Early Years

What is Theory of Mind

Theory of mind is the ability to understand and tune into others' emotions, intentions and beliefs. The development of 'theory of mind' is important for social interactions as you are able to understand others' wants and needs and predict behaviours. Therefore, being able to play co-operatively with other children and increase their flexibility when sharing ideas. Research suggests that theory of mind can begin to develop as young as 15 months old but children aged between 4-5 years begin to think about others' thoughts and feelings more, and this is when true theory of mind begins to be expressed through play and interactions with others.



However, children who have difficulties with communicating with others may have more challenges when developing this skill. For instance, children who are diagnosed with neurodevelopmental conditions or are showing traits of these within the Early Years may need further support to enhance development in this area.



What can we do to support children to develop this area?

Promote Engagement with others

During play and face to face interactions encourage children to notice what others are doing, commentate on the play occurring rather than asking questions. It is best to do this during play that the child enjoys. For example, during playdoh play, you might commentate on the way in which the child is playing 'Oh you are rolling the playdoh with your hands' or 'You are adding glitter to your picture'.



Joint Attention

Creating opportunities to enable experiences of joint attention can encourage children to observe the environment around them. Joint attention is when two people or more people are focusing on the same object or event. For example, an adult and child might both notice a plane flying in the sky, focus on this and have some communication relating to this

The importance of Pretend Play

It has been suggested by theorists and research that pretend play is a step to developing theory of mind. This is due to the ability to take on other people's roles e.g. pretending to be a parent and making dinner in the kitchen, in turn developing the understanding of others.





Language and Vocabulary

During play and daily routines model language that would support theory of mind and how you are feeling. E.g. 'Bobby looks upset, he must have hurt himself on the slide' .



Reading Stories and Talking about the Characters

When reading stories, talk about the characters and their point of view. For example, how they might be feeling or their actions. You can then relate this to the child's own experiences. For example... 'In the story, a child might be upset because they have dropped their ice-cream or let go of their balloon, relate this to a time that your child has experienced and felt like this.

