Young children may express their interests in subtle, often misunderstood ways. By understanding that all children have unique learning styles and emerging interests, adults can support children’s exploration by providing developmentally appropriate play opportunities. Through observation of play, parents, caregivers and early learning professionals can identify the emerging interests of young children in their care and build on children’s understandings. Through play, children develop schemas and scripts; these are organized mental structures that are applied to understanding the world around them. Children’s play can involve a single schema or several schemas all at once. For example, children playing with toy cars may be exploring a combination of transporting, rotation and trajectory.

These schemas can be broken down into nine distinct behaviours or urges observed in young children’s play:
- Trajectory
- Orientation
- Positioning
- Transporting
- Enveloping
- Rotation
- Connecting/Disconnecting
- Transformation
- Enclosing/Containing

Trajectory Schema
Throwing toys, dropping objects, splashing in the water, climbing and jumping off furniture are all activities in the trajectory schema. Understanding how objects and people can move is an important part of child development. A child may not differentiate between throwing a ball and throwing sand if they are exploring the trajectory schema, because understanding the world involves experimenting with objects of different sizes, shapes, weight, and consistencies. Trajectory of one’s own body (climbing and jumping) can be a dangerous behaviour for young children if not supervised carefully, but it is an important part of the trajectory schema.
Orientation Schema

The urge to see the view from under the furniture, to hang upside down off a chair or to look out from on top of a table are actions that are all part of the orientation schema. In order to understand the world from many points of view or perspectives, children will play with concepts of orientation and place themselves in a number of interesting positions. A child with the desire to orient herself from the countertop may not be satisfied with a “No, it’s not safe” and persist if she has the urge to experience the world from the perspective of the toaster, so provide opportunities for safe orientation exploration.

Positioning Schema

Lining up toy cars, standing the farm animals in line next to one another, or placing objects in proper order are all behaviours seen in the positioning schema. Some children may take every colour of paint available and line them up neatly in front of them when they are painting. Others may have the urge to carefully place their shoes side-by-side on the mat. Children who enjoy exploring positioning schema may be interested in helping you set the table for a meal. This schema is alive and well in many adults who may organize their books in alphabetical order or position objects neatly on their desk.

Transporting Schema

Children who have the urge to carry many things at once are exploring the transportation schema. They may carry things in their hands, in baskets, bags, purses, containers or vehicles with wheels. They may also be intrigued by vehicles that transport large quantities of materials or heavy equipment, such as construction vehicles. Children exploring transportation might enjoy books with handles, pails and baskets, toy shopping carts and riding vehicles with storage capacity.
Wrapping a scarf over your head or draping fabrics over objects and furniture are part of the enveloping schema. Children may also have the desire to cover objects with paper and tape, while younger children delight in a simple enveloping game called Peek-a-Boo. Safety is a concern when a child wraps plastic over their head or rope/string around their body and neck. Be sure to offer safe, supervised opportunities for exploring envelopment.

**Enveloping Schema**

**Rotation Schema**

*Rotation* refers to people or objects that spin, turn, or go around anything that is circular, including toys with wheels, spinning tops, door knobs, jar lids, drawing circles, spinning on the spot or being swung around by someone else. Old fashioned merry-go-rounds and spinning tire-swings also fit into this schema. Children may be fascinated by salad spinners, front-loaded washing machines & dryers, motorized fans, and vehicle tires.

**Connecting/Disconnecting Schema**

Building with Lego, linking train tracks, taping objects together, and tying or wrapping string around objects and furniture are all actions in the connection schema.

Connection schema can also include disconnecting, such as when a child builds a tower and then destroys it. Disconnecting can be as much fun as connecting, and just as satisfying for some children.
Transformation can come in many different forms: helping a parent mix cookie dough, crushing crackers into your juice, or holding your food in your mouth for a long time to see what it turns into. It’s natural that once a child has explored and learned about a material that he might want to experiment and do further testing with it. Children may also mix familiar sensory materials together, such as putting sand or water into their playdough to see what happens.

Enclosing/Containing Schema

The desire to fill cups up with water, or climb into boxes, cupboard, or other small spaces are all part of the enclosure/container schema. Children may also build fences for toy animals, or place all of the trains inside the circular train track. Children are learning how their bodies and other objects fit into the spaces around them. This is one of the reasons that children will often play with the box instead of the gift!