

## Science briefing Supporting early learning

The Centre for Early Childhood's Explainer about how adults can support children's learning describes the value of providing a level of guided support known as scaffolding.

This briefing summarises the science behind this animation.



Watch the Explainer Series on the  
Centre for Early Childhood website  
[centreforearlychildhood.org/  
the-explainer-series/](https://centreforearlychildhood.org/the-explainer-series/)

### Scaffolding unpacked

1. Scaffolding occurs when adults support children's learning by helping them to do something for themselves. When we scaffold for a child we make a task easier for them, or adjust the level of guidance and support we provide, led by their needs and abilities. This supports the child in mastering new skills, and avoids adults doing things for the child or being too directive<sup>1</sup>.
2. Scaffolding is a metaphor based on how physical scaffolding is put around a building when it is being built and removed as the building is completed. In the same way, scaffolding is provided as children develop

and can be gradually removed as they learn the ability to master new skills. Whilst scaffolding around a building might be built and unbuilt, scaffolding a child's activities can change from moment-to-moment as we adapt to their needs and the challenges they face. Rather than building a large immovable structure, it is therefore more like putting a plank down to support them, helping them step in a new direction.



**“Scaffolding can take many forms including: simplifying a task, providing a helping hand or using verbal guidance.”**

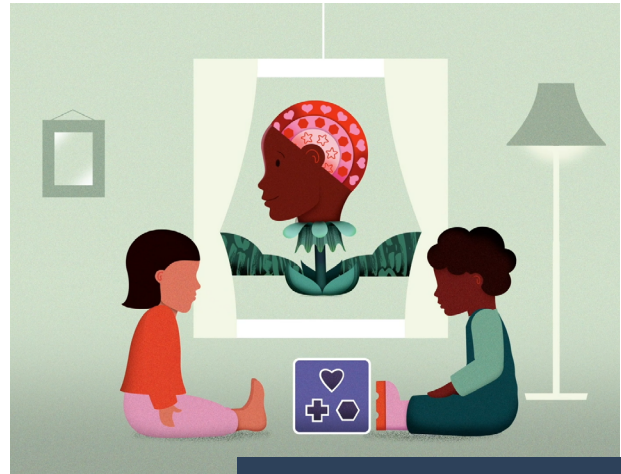
3. Scaffolding can take many forms including: simplifying a task, providing a helping hand or using verbal guidance. We might provide encouragement or use “guiding questions” to support children in coming up with answers and solutions independently. These techniques help a child to stay focussed while supporting their autonomy. For example, if a child is doing a jigsaw, you might ask, “What did you do last time that helped you to complete the puzzle?”, or “Let’s start with the corner pieces, they should be easier, can you find them?”
4. Children learn best in a goldilocks zone where a task is neither too hard nor too easy. Scaffolding helps children develop capacities which are in the “Zone of Proximal Development” – new skills and capacities that are not mature yet but are currently in the process of maturation<sup>2</sup>. For example, if a child is learning to walk, a parent might hold both hands to support this developing skill. Hand holding in this way is not useful if a child cannot yet stand, and does not help the child if they are already walking securely. It is a useful scaffold while the child is developing the ability to walk independently. Of course hand holding still serves other functions, such as offering comfort and security.
5. To effectively scaffold a child, we must understand what they might be capable of doing, recognise the support they need, and adapt ourselves accordingly. This overlaps with other concepts in the Explainer Series. To scaffold a child effectively we must be attuned to them. Scaffolding overlaps with contingent responsiveness, as adults sensitively adapt their behaviours and responses to a child’s needs.

# Scaffolding supports social and emotional development

Scaffolding can support the development of a wide range of abilities, including language, motor skills and social and emotional skills.

## Nurturing our relationships

Scaffolding can help children in their social interactions<sup>3</sup>. For example, parents might recognise that their child is nervous when going to play with new children, and facilitate social interactions, providing cues, prompts and encouragement. For example, “Look at Mo’s fire engine, I think maybe he likes vehicles just like you do. Maybe you could show him your police car?”



By scaffolding peer relationships, adults can help children to build confidence and empathy.

Scaffolding supports the adult-child relationship too. By providing scaffolding, adults are supporting children’s exploration and learning and providing the right level of comfort and support. Through these interactions a child experiences relationship as a secure base – a place where they can feel loved, safe, secure and protected<sup>4</sup>. This gives them more confidence to explore the world around them.

**“By providing scaffolding, adults are supporting children’s exploration and learning and providing the right level of support.”**

## Communicating with others

Scaffolding can support children’s communication skills. Adults who ask open-ended questions or provide verbal prompts help children to process ideas and develop expressive language skills.

## Focusing our thoughts

Scaffolding can support a child’s learning and development. We might scaffold a child to achieve a task that they wish to accomplish themselves – maybe scaling a piece of equipment that they want to explore in the playground. Or we might be focussed on a goal set by adults, such as putting on their coat and shoes. Either way, scaffolding involves being led by the child’s needs and abilities.



Scaffolding recognises that children learn best when they are mentally active, engaged and interacting with the world around them<sup>5,6</sup>. By allowing a child to do more by themselves we give them greater responsibility and agency, which is generally rewarding for the child and helps them to develop their confidence.

Because scaffolding helps children to do things for themselves, it also supports skills like focusing attention, problem solving and keeping going<sup>7,8</sup>.

### **Exploring the world**

When adults use more “hands-off” scaffolding – offering support without taking over – they make space for children’s exploration, curiosity and persistence. As children experience mastering a task, they will develop confidence and feel more empowered to try new things.

## **Scaffolding helps a child to feel safe and loved**

When we provide scaffolding we show children that we believe in their potential, and that they can rely on us to provide help and support. This supports their growing confidence in themselves, and trust in the people around them.



## Using scaffolding in practice

As a practitioner working with families you might introduce the idea of scaffolding to help caregivers reflect on how to adjust their expectations, and to support their child's level of development.

Scaffolding might help a family reduce sources of frustration. Sometimes a child is frustrated because they do not have the agency they want, or a parent is frustrated that a child is not doing something they have been asked to. Scaffolding might help a family find a more comfortable middle ground.



If you are working directly with children, you might consider how you yourself scaffold children's learning and adapt to each child's level of development. How do you step in – or step away – to help a child stretch into new abilities?

If you want to talk about scaffolding in simpler terms, you might want to talk about gentle guidance, breaking things down, providing a helping hand, and stepping back.

## References

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