

A young child with long brown hair, wearing a bright red hooded jacket and blue patterned shoes, is crouching on a sandy beach. The child is pointing their right index finger at a small pile of sand. The background shows the vast expanse of the beach with some small debris scattered about. The lighting suggests it's daytime, with a shadow cast by the child onto the sand.

Cath Arnold and
the **Pen Green Team**

Understanding Schemas and Emotion

in **Early Childhood**



Understanding Schemas and Emotion in Early Childhood

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Cath Arnold, currently working as an Early Childhood Consultant, has worked for over 30 years in private and public sector provision. Cath has written two previous books about her grandchildren's early development and learning and is very committed to working alongside parents to understand young children's development and learning.

THE PEN GREEN TEAM

The Pen Green Team are a team of researchers and nursery workers who all collaborated in a study of children's Well-being and Resilience from 2001–2004. This book tells a **very small** part of the story of that study and is just one of the outcomes of the four year study. The study was partly funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Charitable Trust and further funded and fully supported by the Pen Green Research, Development and Training Base, Corby, Northants, a self-financing organisation. As lead author, I am very grateful to the funders for the opportunity to work in such an innovative and intimate way with a small number of families.

The full time researchers involved were: Dr Margy Whalley, Dr Cath Arnold, Marcus Dennison, Colette Tait, Eddie McKinnon and Robert Orr. In addition, Dr Natasha Charlwood carried out Adult Attachment Interviews with parents at the start of the study and made links between parents' attachment experiences and children's social and emotional well-being, which was subsequently reported in an EECERA journal article (Charlwood and Steele, 2004). Maggie Haggerty (Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand) worked as part of the team for the first year of the study and contributed hugely to our thinking about young children's well-being.

The full time nursery workers involved were: the late Katey Mairs (Deputy Head of the Pen Green Centre), Angela Prodger (Head of Nursery), Annette Cummings, Louise King, Michele McCabe, Michelle McGinn, Denise Hammond, Margaret Myles and Tracy Coull.

All of these workers along with the parents involved made major contributions to the study reported in the unpublished report available at the Pen Green Centre, 'A Research and Development Project to Promote Well-being and Resilience in Young Children' (Pen Green Team, 2004). All workers and researchers involved, engaged in deep and challenging dialogue with parents about their children's well-being and resilience. The learning from the study has become embedded in practice at the Pen Green Centre and has informed our engagement with children and families in many many ways.

Understanding Schemas and Emotion in Early Childhood

CATH ARNOLD
and the Pen Green Team



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

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Conventions Used in this Book

- Schemas are underlined and refer to the 'form' of actions and thinking.
- Observations are italicised, as are quotes at the beginning of chapters.
- The use of 'we' and 'I' – the 'Well-being and Resilience' study carried out at the Pen Green Centre from 2000 to 2004 involved a team of researchers, workers, parents and children all collaborating together. Much of this book is expressed as 'we' to reflect the investigation carried out by all of the people involved. Aspects of the study that affected only me, my personal experiences and my personal learning, for example in Chapter 9, are expressed as 'I'.
- I use the concept of 'emotion' rather than the concept of 'feeling' to describe what is observable in the body movement, actions and language of each child. 'Feeling' seems to be the private unobservable aspect of emotion (Damasio, 1999).

It is through feelings, which are inwardly directed and private, that emotions, which are outwardly directed and public, begin their impact on the mind; but the full and lasting impact of feelings requires consciousness, because only along with the advent of a sense of self do feelings become known to the person having them. (Damasio, 1999, p. 36)

Outline of this Book

This book is designed so that chapters can be read independently of each other. A similar structure is used throughout: we begin each chapter with an opening summary, then 'Introduction and context', followed by 'Observations, discussions and interpretations'. We then try to address the 'So what?' question and end with schemas mentioned and suggested further reading.

Chapter 1 is about engaging in Child Study and also presents ideas for making useful observations and analysing them.

In Chapter 2, we meet Ewan, who demonstrated his need for a ritualised separation. We consider how that need manifested itself in his play and contributed to his coping with short separations from his parents.

In Chapter 3, we introduce John, who explored lines and connecting extensively in his effort to gain control of his world. John also came to something of an understanding of separations through his play.

Chapter 4 describes Caitlin's explorations of containing, enveloping and transporting and how she drew on these patterns of action when her security was under threat.

Chapter 5 shows Edward's explorations of 'together' and 'apart' through his repeated actions of connecting and disconnecting. The chapter also presents observations of Edward's investigation of going from the 'vertical' position to the 'horizontal' position.

Chapter 6 depicts Sam's explorations of enveloping, containing and seriation at a time when she was trying to understand 'presence' and 'absence' and issues around power.

Chapter 7 describes Susan's explorations of containing, enveloping and going through a boundary to understand separation and loss.

Chapter 8 focuses on the death of Cara's Great Uncle and her explorations of death and loss.

Shaw found that when she paid attention to emotions in others, she was surprised by the emotions evoked in her and that at times she 'was overwhelmed by the pain' of others (1991, p. 267).

In Chapter 9, I describe my growing awareness of my own responses to emotions and emotional events.

Chapter 10 draws together some conclusions and proposes a new concept to explain how human beings use repeated patterns to understand emotional experiences and moral issues.

Foreword

By Margy Whalley

Only an education which takes very seriously the child's view of things can change the world for the better ... The power relationships between adults and children are all wrong and they must be changed, so adults can no longer be convinced that they are right to arrange the life and world of the child as they see best without consulting the child's feelings ... Janusz Korczak

Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families opened in 1983 and our central concern was always that children using the services should feel strong, able to question and challenge, able to make good choices and that they should be emotionally resilient. As early childhood educators we were constructivists trying hard to understand and support children's passion for learning. We were hungry to develop what Chris Athey describes as a more conscious and articulated pedagogy. As a staff group we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the giants whose shoulders we stand on. We have been fortunate indeed to work directly over many years with Chris Athey and with Tina Bruce. We have also been able to develop our thinking through the practical application of Chris Athey's Schema theory in the work of Janet Shaw and Patrick Easen. Cath Arnold's study builds on this strong tradition of thinking deeply about children's cognitive concerns.

Initially, in early 1988, when Chris Athey first attended a Pen Green staff and parent training session and shared her ideas with us, staff were challenged and taken a long way out of their comfort zone. It became clear during the session that it was the parents who were better able to listen and apply their new understandings. Parents could draw on their own intimate observations of their children at home, and eagerly contributed to the debate. They were keen to share knowledge about how their children were learning at home and confidently describe the schemas they had spotted. One mother shared with us how her daughter repeatedly put toothpaste all around the outside edge of her mug. Another told us how her son was hanging things from trees in the garden and repeatedly using string to tie up the house, attaching string to door handles and banisters. Some of this play really disturbed the mother

who associated what he was doing with the macabre – making nooses and hanging. She was very reassured to find out that he had a ‘Connecting Schema’.

Staff struggled at first with what seemed like a new pedagogical language. They were accustomed to robustly observing children in the Susan Isaacs tradition but needed to become much stronger theoretically. Assessment frameworks had to change and Possible Lines of Direction Plans (PLODs) were developed that documented the learning journey of each child. For the first time nursery planning sessions included exhaustive theoretical discussions about the laws of physics. Parents and staff became equally committed to celebrating the children’s achievements and helping them to be all that they could be.

Twenty-one years later staff and parents still dialogue, debate and work collaboratively to support the children’s learning and development at Pen Green. Many of the parents who attended that first session with Chris Athey went on to participate in our Parents Involvement In Children’s Learning programme and Cath made a major contribution developing this work. Parents attended study groups, received accreditation, engaged in their own studies and professional development and continue to this day to support their children’s studies.

Pen Green has always been a place where children were able to express strong emotions. As a staff group we have always wanted to respect children’s right to express their anger and their sadness. Our deepening understanding of Schema theory helped us to extend and support their thinking and at the same time we wanted to support them in expressing, understanding and dealing with their feelings. In this seminal book Cath Arnold plots the development of our shared understanding about how children’s emotional needs and cognitive concerns can best be supported. She describes how a deep understanding of children’s schemas can illuminate how children are making sense of their often challenging worlds. Cath’s wonderfully rich case studies of Ewan, John, Caitlin, Edward, Sam, Susan and Cara are all drawn from data gathered by the Pen Green Research Base during the period 2000–2004. These case studies powerfully illustrate how children respond to the stressors in their lives. Cath skilfully examines how children are affected by grief and loss, estrangement, parental depression and parental lack of responsiveness. She explores children’s need to feel powerful, authoritative and leaderful within the nursery setting when they are dealing with complexity and adversity at home. She shows how challenge and adversity – what Rutter describes as steeling experiences – can actually increase children’s resilience and sense of self efficacy. Each of the case studies demonstrates the vitally important role of their key worker in the nursery.

In her concluding chapters Cath acknowledges the importance of technical supervision for staff working at the emotional ‘coal face’. If staff are to take

account of children's feelings, if staff are to effectively advocate on behalf of children and sustain parents in their critical role as the child's first educator and most effective advocate, the staff must also feel contained through the supervisory process.

Cath is unrelenting in her commitment to developing nursery staff as practitioner researchers. She is concerned that they should be capable of challenging their own practice and at the same time able to engage with theory. Cath takes us on a journey through the writings of Piaget, Vygotsky, Freud, Bowlby and Winnicott to our contemporaries Trevarthen, Kraemer and Steele, academic colleagues who have all worked directly with staff in the Pen Green nursery and research base. Cath has courageously identified her own 'ghosts' which have impacted on her practice as a pedagogue and parent. Her challenge to all of us working with children and their families is to reflect deeply on our own experiences and develop appropriate support within our settings so that we can confront our own issues. Then and only then will we be emotionally available, able to effectively engage with children and their families as companions in their learning.

Introduction

A schema is a mode of reactions susceptible of reproducing themselves and susceptible above all of being generalized. (Piaget, 1962, p. 95)

Schemas are patterns of repeatable actions that lead to early categories and then to logical classifications. (Athey, 2007, p. 49)

Recognition of the child's schemas appears to give the parent and teacher access to the child's emotional experience in addition to her intellectual development. (Shaw, 1991, p. 6)

This chapter introduces:

- The context in which a study of young children's schemas and emotional experiences took place
- A brief examination of the theory used to illuminate children's actions
- A critical incident that prompted a closer look at schemas and emotion and resulted in some new learning about how young children use schemas
- A plan of this book

We begin this account with three quotes: the first from Piaget, who wrote extensively about schemas and offered a theory to explain young children's development and learning. Piaget and Inhelder proposed that human beings learn through repeatedly acting on objects and materials within the environment. They identified many of these early actions, 'like putting things next to one another (proximity) or in series (order), actions of enclosing, of tightening or loosening, changing viewpoints, cutting, rotating, folding or unfolding,

enlarging and reducing and so on' (Piaget and Inhelder, 1956, p. 453).

Piaget believed that as human beings, we build up working theories through repeating our actions. We 'assimilate' new content into our current models or structures (he meant schemas) and sometimes have to 'accommodate' our actions and knowledge when something unexpected happens (Piaget, 1950/2001, p. 8). This is when we might adapt our actions and learn new patterns or adapt our actions to continue exploring a pattern we are using.

The second quote is from Chris Athey, whose seminal text has made Piaget's work accessible to many teachers and Early Childhood workers. She has also applied Piaget's theories to children aged 2–5 years (Athey, 2007). Her research and positive view of young children's cognitive development, hand in hand with recent research on the brain, has changed our view of young children. Unlike Piaget, who seemed to focus on a deficit view of children (signified by what they had not achieved or learned so far), Athey saw children as able and competent, actively seeking new content to assimilate into current structures (or schemas).

The third quote is from Janet Shaw, less well known, but the first person to pursue the link between schemas and emotion in early childhood. Shaw was a home-visiting teacher in the North of England, who on visits to vulnerable families, shared ideas with parents about their children's repeated actions or schemas (Shaw, 1991, p. 110).

Shaw put forward this idea of a connection between schemas and emotions, an idea that had fascinated parents and Early Childhood workers at the Pen Green Centre for a number of years. Many parents and workers, who have closely observed young children and been able to spot their repeated patterns of action, have wondered what motivates children to use particular patterns over time. There seems to be no strict hierarchy in the order in which schemas emerge, although it is well established that children always build on their own earlier learning (Athey, 2007; Meade and Cubey, 2008; Nutbrown, 2006). Shaw also ventured into a field new to her, that of psychoanalytic theory, just as we have done in this recent study of young children and schemas.

THE INFLUENCE OF VYGOTSKY

Although Piaget and his followers have influenced our thinking about young children and their development and learning, we have also been influenced by Vygotsky, whose main focus was on the role of other people in children's development. Vygotsky's theory was that,

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This

applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. (1978, p. 57)

Each child's world begins with the family context and events that occur within that context. In this book we try to make links between observed and identified patterns or schemas and each child's sociocultural context at the time. We believe that schemas are 'universals' but that the cultural context, including emotional aspects, seem to flesh out particular behaviours at certain times.

THIS BOOK

■ This book is about 'a subject whose time has come' (Whalley, 2009). We are not about to abandon any of our rigour or learning about cognitive development in favour of a 'soft' or cosy approach to thinking about emotions. We are trying to demonstrate some possible motives for children's actions, as well as trying to figure out how cognition in action can assist young children in processing and coming to understand very real emotional events in their lives.

THE WIDER CONTEXT

■ The children we introduce to you in this book were part of a bigger study of young children's well-being and resilience, which took place at the Pen Green Nursery from 2000 to 2004 (Pen Green Team, 2004).

The Pen Green Centre for Under Fives and Their Families was set up in 1983 in what was considered a disadvantaged area of the Midlands. The centre provided services for the local community which responded to local need and grew gradually from the bottom up. Today, the centre provides:

Early years education

Extended hours, extended year provision to support families

Inclusive, flexible education with care for children in need and children with special educational needs

Adult community education and family support services

Voluntary work and community regeneration

Training and support for early years practitioners

Research and development. (Whalley, 2007, p. 5)

The Pen Green Research Base was set up in 1996 in order to debate 'teaching and learning and curriculum issues with parents' and more widely in the early years community (Whalley, 2007, p. 9). The first major research study, funded

by the Esmee Fairbairn Trust, was on 'Involving parents in their children's learning' and was documented in the book of that name by Margy Whalley and the Pen Green Team. The study of young children's well-being and resilience built on our earlier learning and that, too, was partly funded by the Esmee Fairbairn Trust.

THE CONTEXT OF THIS STUDY

As a research team, we worked in partnership with the children, their parents and workers. Fifty-eight children were studied over a period of four years. We filmed the children in nursery and some parents also filmed their children at home. Then we met with the parents, workers and sometimes children too, to discuss and interpret what we saw on film. This technique was something we had tried out before (Whalley, 2007, p. 70). The parents and children brought information from home and about family events and we brought some child development theory to the discussions. Together, we formed what Easen et al. have described as a 'developmental partnership' in order to benefit the children and also to further knowledge in the field (Easen et al., 1992, p. 287).

OUR KNOWLEDGE BASE

Since the late 1980s, as workers and parents at the Pen Green Centre, we had been identifying children's schemas in order to support the children's cognitive concerns and explorations, both at nursery and at home. We had considerably changed our environment and routines at nursery in order to maximise the opportunities for children to explore their current concerns and to become deeply 'involved' in play (Laevers, 1997, p. 20).

As a result of our work with schemas, many parents found themselves providing resources such as, for example, string and sellotape for their children to connect as Christmas gifts, rather than more expensive manufactured toys. We were supported in this ongoing study of children's schemas by Tina Bruce and Chris Athey over a number of years. Defining schemas and sharing that information with parents, was both a challenge and a joy. We sometimes struggled to explain what we meant by 'schemas' to the parents, but viewing video vignettes of their children helped to communicate this idea of 'repeated actions' (the movement aspect) and resulting 'configurations' (the shape). Matthews drew on brain research to conclude that, as human beings, we seek information about the 'shape' and 'movement' of objects and events (Matthews, 2003, p. 23).



◀ Offering clay for children to work in three dimensions

Maple blocks ▶



◀ Writing and communication