

Practica Program

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The Way We Group Things



As our children learn to group or 'classify' things they learn how to think about the world. Focusing on helping your child to do this really well is one of the greatest contributions you can possibly make towards his intellectual development.

By teaching your child something as simple as where to look for a crayon, what he needs to play a certain game and pointing out what he typically has for breakfast you are laying a foundation in him that will one day help him to create order in his world. That in turn will help him to cope confidently with unknowns when you are not around to give him the answers.

Helping him to learn

How does a small child learn such a tricky way of thinking? He learns by example. You help him. Almost every minute of the day, he hears and sees you using the idea of 'same' and 'different' that underlies all classification.

When a baby points to a dog and says 'dog' we are impressed that he is learning to say dog.

Yet, what is even more astonishing is that he is learning to think dog.

He may initially point to a cat and label it and also label it as *dog*, but by the age of 30 months most children can recognize the features that are the same for all dogs and cats.

He identifies both a Chihuahua and a Great Dane as a dog. He can recognize a real dog, a stuffed toy dog, a photograph of a dog and a drawing of a dog.

But what is the 'dogness' he has learned to recognize? Try making a list of the features that are the same for all dogs, but that make them different from all other animals. It is harder than we think! Yet our children's brains are wired to figure all of this out!



Children need a hand in understanding the ideas of same and different. They will manage on their own, but they will do much better with a boost from you. And the more you feed them with ideas, the more surprising they will become.

A boy, examining the floppy wings of a plastic grasshopper, announced: 'Butterfly.' 'It's a grasshopper,' his mother explained, 'but it flies like a butterfly.' 'Birds fly,' said the boy, 'and bats and aeroplanes and kites, and,' finished the boy, 'capes fly.'

His idea of flying was very basic, very practical. His mother's comment had helped him to classify in terms of 'same way of moving'.

With more talk and more experience he will learn about things that float, flap, blow, are jet-powered or propeller-driven. And he will be able to classify them with accuracy.

The importance of words

Children need lots of words to describe the likenesses and differences they see, hear, feel or smell.

Do not shy away from using exact ones: wide, narrow, pink, purple, half the length of my finger, fatter than a pillow, pointed, curly, straight, coarse, upside-down, sour, crunchy, the day after tomorrow or yesterday.

Words make sense out of the most everyday experiences. You just have to catch your own thoughts and say them out loud.

If you want your child to get a pair of socks from on top of the table, and he looks underneath, it is no help to say: 'No, not there; *there*.' It is a help to say: 'Not *under* the table; *on* the table.'

If he then brings you the red socks instead of the blue ones, it is no help to say: 'No, not these; *those*.' It is a help to say: 'Bring me the *blue* socks not the *red* socks.'

And go further — you want him to get the blue socks because you are going to dress him in his blue trousers - tell him so. Tell him how handsome he will look because the colour of his blue socks goes with his blue trousers.

Once he knows the words that are his keys to same and different, there are lots of ways he can have fun classifying things around the house. He can sort socks by size and colour, set the table, put away the cutlery, find things for you in the supermarket and group people he knows together in different families.

Before you know it your child will be looking at the world differently!