

3. Observation of a Child in a Preschool Setting

S (a three-year-old boy) comes into the setting in front of his mother and is already grabbing his hat off and pulling at the zip on his coat. His mother helps him take his coat off – quickly as he is clearly raring to go. He is quite stocky and moves around the room looking at whatever he comes across and seemingly making a quick decision as to whether it is worthy of his attention. He picks up and discards a puppet by dropping it; he picks up a piece of Brio track and throws it down; he knocks into other children on a couple of occasions because he doesn't quite manage to get around them to get to the toy or object he is looking at. He doesn't settle with anything for the first five minutes, but continues to look at things and then move on.

A group of children have started to make palettes with two of the staff giving guidance – sticking bits of different coloured materials (wool, felt, paper, foil etc.) onto cardboard palette shapes. S is immediately drawn by this (it is a new activity) and comes purposefully into the group and takes a 'completed' palette off one of the staff and squats on the floor and stares at it for a few seconds. Then with great interest and concentration he proceeds to quickly pull all the bits off the cardboard. His mother looks embarrassed and stops him doing the same thing to another palette, telling the worker that 'he's always wrecking things'.

S has moved away; another worker has got a big bowl of water out so that children (who in an earlier session had made paper boats out of paper that had been covered in wax crayoning) could see if their boats floated. S headed straight for the bowl and looked intently for a few seconds at the two or three boats on it. He then reached in and pushed one of the boats downwards, effectively sinking it. Another child also watching the boats wailed at this, and the worker overseeing the activity remonstrated with S who was trying to sink another boat. The worker picked him up to remove him whereupon he kicked and screamed and then began to cry. His mother who had been chatting with other parents came over and held S on her knee but tried to distract him saying 'look at what A is doing' but he continued to cry loudly and squirm on her lap, trying to get away. After a few minutes, the mother said that if he stopped crying he could have a biscuit. S looked at the plate of biscuits on the table and held his hand out towards the plate as he began to stop crying.

At no time during this observation of his playing, did S speak or appear to relate directly to other children or adults or his mother. He was only spoken to twice and on each occasion this was to admonish him about his behaviour – at neither time did he make eye contact with the adult.

However as he stopped crying, a worker announced that juice and toast were ready. S looked up and slipped off his mother's lap and moved to the table and nodded to the worker who asked if would like juice and pointed to the jug of apple juice (as opposed to orange). He also sat down when the worker asked him to and he then turned his whole attention to eating and drinking.

Questions

Chapter 1

- Are there any playwork principles that are not seemingly understood or practiced by this setting?
- What might you advise any of the workers in this setting to reflect on?

Chapter 2

- Taking a therapeutic perspective, what kind of playing might S need?
- From a developmental perspective, what kind of playing might S need?

Chapter 3

- What play types might S be trying to access?
- What play cues is S giving out? What returns is he getting? What is 'cuing' or attracting him? How might you cue him?

Chapter 4

- How is S perceived by his mother? By the setting? By you?

Chapter 5

- How might you adapt or resource the play space to meet S's play needs?

Chapter 6

- How might we employ our duty of care to S as well as to the other children in this setting?
- Do our policies include understanding of and provision for boys who might be seen by some as aggressive, uncoordinated or anti-social?

Chapter 7

- What kind of play spaces might attract S?

Chapter 8

- Why might have this observation of S been made? What can we learn from observing particular children and how might it help our practice?