

Emerson and the Puzzle

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Recently, in response to an overwhelming interest in puzzles, we have been exploring floor puzzles, different sizes of jigsaw puzzles, chunky puzzles, and even a puzzle that makes sounds. A new and interesting experience in our room.

Emerson, I've noticed how you chose time and again to continue with the same puzzle — repeatedly deconstructing it and putting it back together. Emerson, when I think about you and the puzzle building — I believe you to be an expert.

Today, you and Gavin choose the floor mats for your puzzle play. Clasp a wooden piece with his fingertips, Gavin pulls his hand across the empty puzzle board. The shark he holds bumps up and down as he pulls it, but doesn't fall into place. Looking to me, Gavin asks, "Help plea." "I know you can do this. Try turning it." I respond, as I make a turning action with my hand.

Looking around, Gavin notices you sitting behind him, "Emson, help, plea" he asks again. I wonder if Gavin also recognizes you as an expert? In response Emerson, you slide your body over to Gavin, take the piece and put it in its rightful place, "Here. Like this." Picking up the next sea creature, Gavin again turns to you, "Emson, help plea." Together you move through the puzzle — Gavin choosing the pieces, you sliding them into place.

With the puzzle complete you move back to your work leaving Gavin to remove the pieces for his second attempt. As with last time, Gavin turns to you for help.

Without hesitation, you slide back alongside Gavin and scan the puzzle for a few seconds before responding, "Try turnin' it."

With puzzle piece in hand, Gavin rotates his wrist to the right and then to the left — he repeats this action several times with no avail. "Help plea." Gavin's request is heard again, however this time you respond by placing your own hand on top of Gavin's and guide the piece into the right spot.

Sliding the puzzle onto your own lap you begin placing pieces in.

You narrate your actions as you go, "This is the Octopus. You have to turn it." Beside you, Gavin rolls a puzzle piece over in his hands, his thumb stroking the smooth edge; his eyes set upon you, he watches carefully as you negotiate each piece. You continue to work and describe your actions; Gavin appears captivated by your teachings.

Emerson, puzzle complete you leave for snack, allowing Gavin to navigate the puzzle on his own. Employing the methods he has just learned from you, Gavin places the squid over each of the empty spaces and slowly twists it in a circle until it drops into place.

As the first piece gently slides into the correct position Gavin looks up at me with bright eyes and smiling — he enthusiastically exclaims, "I did it!"



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Continued



Curricular Connections

The Tanager Room is a space that Emerson knows; through the secure, consistent, and responsive relationships that Emerson experiences both inside and outside the centre, I believe that he holds a strong sense of self — who he is within this space and within relation to his peers. I have noticed how he demonstrates his sense of self, as a puzzle builder, working through puzzles again and again. Emerson reveals his sense of security as he pursues his own interests, makes choices for his own play, and takes risks when he feels it is safe to do so. Additionally, as Emerson guides Gavin through the puzzle, supporting, listening, modeling, and using hand over hand with him, he demonstrates his sense of other — his perception of another person's needs and emotions. As Emerson continues to build respectful and responsive relationships with both peers and adults, he displays his growing awareness that his actions contribute to the well-being of others.

As I first observed this play experience, I am reminded of psychologist and developmental theorist Lev Vygotsky's theory on the zone of proximal development (ZPD), a hypothetical region where learning and development take place; experiences provided within this zone are "challenging for the child but achievable with sensitive... guidance" (Berk & Winsler, 2002, p. 25). It is within this zone where Emerson, a more experienced peer scaffolds Gavin's learning, providing him the support required to place the puzzle piece. Moving through the puzzle, Emerson adjusts the amount of assistance he provides Gavin based on Gavin's requests and Emerson's own abilities — in this way, Emerson supports Gavin in reaching his own goal. What one can do in cooperation today, he can do by himself tomorrow.

As Emerson narrates his actions, he engages in private speech — the verbalizing of thoughts for self-guidance and self-direction. As described by Vygotsky, private speech is a means for children to plan activities and strategies — thereby

aiding in their own learning and development. I wonder if Emerson's open communication provided an unintentional map for Gavin's learning and development?

As Emerson participates in guiding Gavin through the puzzle, he takes on the role of a more experienced peer, acting as a leader within their play. In verbalizing his thoughts, Emerson private speech moves into the public domain, as he uses language to describe, inform, and share information with others.

As Emerson observes Gavin, problem-solves, and engages with Gavin to complete the puzzle, he supports Gavin in his play, further fostering Gavin's own participation and facilitating Gavin's autonomy as he moves forward on the puzzle.

Opportunities and Possibilities

This experience highlights Emerson's growth as a leader within our environment; he works with Gavin so patiently, modeling the next steps, providing cues, and thinking out loud: scaffolding with such skill! I wonder if Emerson recognizes himself as a leader?

Emerson appears to enjoy, and may benefit from further, opportunities to problem-solve. Experiences within his own ZPD, that are achievable and yet challenging, may encourage his disposition to persist.

A ramped geo-board (similar to PLINKO, but at a lesser angle) could provide Emerson an opportunity to create pathways. Elastics placed on the pegs will create walls for a material to run through. By manipulating the location of a wall, he could directly change the path that the material will take when moving down the ramp. Opportunities for problem-solving and creative-thinking will naturally present themselves as Emerson creates and tests out his own theories. As he meets challenges, Emerson may continue to engage in private speech; it is a mode by which he can plan, organizes his thoughts, and guide his actions.



play participation possibilities



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