

- For early years practitioners

EARLY YEARS PEDAGOGY

Sustained Shared Thinking

A national, government-commissioned study of England's most effective early years settings, published in 2002.

How often do you and a learner properly think something through together, not you leading and them following, but both of you adding something new?

In a study of England's most effective early years settings, staff and learners rarely stopped to really think something through together, but excellent settings did it significantly more than good ones, and when it happened, it extended what learners were thinking about.

● ● ● Evidence: Promising

A contemporary controlled UK replication with full statistical estimates would test whether sustained shared thinking predicts outcomes beyond pre-existing setting differences.

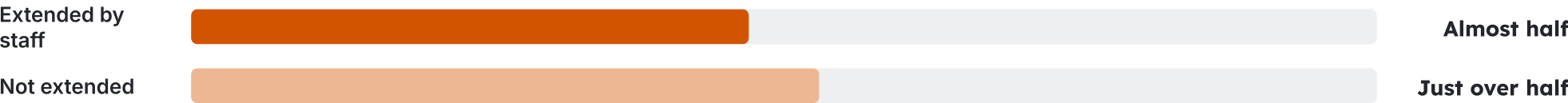


WHAT HAPPENED

Real teaching, watched closely, in the best settings in the country

Researchers spent several months in 2002 observing real teaching in 12 of England's most effective early years settings, chosen from a national study that followed more than 3,000 learners in 141 settings. Properly shared thinking, where an adult and a learner work on an idea together and both genuinely add something new, turned out to be rare even in these settings, but it happened significantly more often in the most outstanding ones than in the merely good ones. When it did happen, it visibly extended what learners were thinking about, and in almost half of the challenging moments that learners started themselves, a member of staff stepped in to stretch their thinking further.

Challenging moments learners started themselves (excellent settings)



REPEY did not report an exact percentage here, only "almost half", so this chart shows an approximate proportion, not a precise statistic. Sustained shared thinking overall was rare even in the most effective settings, and significantly more common in the "excellent" settings than the "good" ones (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, pp.10-11, 51).

The moves she used

- 1

Scaffolding

Knows the learner's level, then stretches it with a question pitched just above what they can do alone.
- 2

Extending

A quick suggestion that opens a new possibility inside what the learner is already doing.
- 3

Discussing

A real back-and-forth, more than a string of questions, letting ideas pass both ways.
- 4

Modelling

Demonstrating an activity while narrating it aloud, with the learner's full attention.
- 5

Playing

Using humour, or joining the learner's play as an equal, not just watching.

Across your areas of provision

This was one national study of a small number of early years settings. What follows are sensible ways the same idea could work across your own setting: worth trying, not proven for your room specifically.

Area of provision	How the pattern could apply
Home corner / role play	Join the play as a character, not a director. The study's own transcript shows a practitioner joining a home-corner teatime scene by asking "what's for dinner?", not "what are you doing?"
Small-world play	Extend rather than redirect. In the study's own example, a practitioner asks how the farm animals will "get out" of their pen, and the learner adds a gate to the fence.
Sand, water, malleable	Scaffold with a question pitched just above what the learner can do alone, then step back once they've got it.
Book corner / story time	Discuss properly. Go beyond a string of questions and let the learner's own idea change where the conversation goes.
Outdoor / investigation	Model out loud. Show what you're doing and narrate your thinking as you go, like the acorn-planting example in the study.

Adapt by group

Quiet or reluctant talkers

Try 1:1 or a single peer pair first. The study found shared thinking was most likely here, not in a whole group.

Learners with English as an additional language

Lean on modelling and narrated demonstration before discussion, so the language load doesn't outrun the thinking.

A boisterous, high-energy group

Anchor to one learner's play at a time inside the group, rather than addressing everyone at once.

Learners with SEND

Extending, a quick, low-pressure suggestion, is often the lowest-friction move to try first.

Start with one: try "extending" first. The study describes it as the quickest of the moves to use, a single suggestion that opens up a new possibility inside whatever the learner is already doing, not a whole new conversation.

A genuinely rich observational study, not a controlled trial

Developing

This rates the evidence's firmness, not our endorsement of the idea. It is real, carefully coded observation in real English settings, but a correlational case study, not an experiment.

- This comes from a small number of settings, 12 case-study centres (only 10 with full observation data), inside a much bigger 3,000-learner study, not a randomised trial. We can't prove these moves alone caused better outcomes.
- The fieldwork is from 2002, over two decades old, and the report itself says full statistical detail was left for "further technical publications" not included in this document.
- Truly shared thinking was rare even in the best settings, and most likely in 1:1 or paired moments, which don't come round often in a busy room; the study also found it isn't enough on its own without good subject knowledge (its own phonics example).

What that means for you: treat the pattern (properly shared thinking is rare, valuable, and more likely one-to-one or in pairs) as well-evidenced. Treat any single figure, like "almost half", as an illustration of scale from one study, not a target to hit.

TRY IT THIS WEEK

Your first small step

THIS WEEK

Pick one moment today when a learner starts something with real thinking in it, a question, a made-up story, a puzzle, and try one move: extend it with a single suggestion that opens a new possibility, rather than redirecting them to something else.

Try it and watch: notice whether the learner adds something back, a new idea, a new word, a change of direction. That's your own evidence, not ours.

Go deeper

Sustained shared thinking: a teacher's guide · structural-learning.com/post/sustained-shared-thinking-teachers-guide

Open a free account

app.structural-learning.com/register

Structural Learning · evidence without the hype.