

- For early years and Reception practitioners

SCAFFOLDING: THE FADING PATTERN

Support That Fades

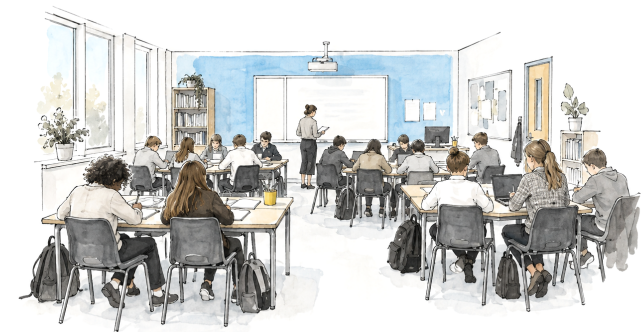
A classic study from a US research lab in the 1970s, the one that gave us the word "scaffolding", translated here for today's early years practice.

When a child masters something new, how quickly does your help actually step back?

In the study that coined the word "scaffolding", one tutor working one-to-one with 30 three- to five-year-olds gave direct, hands-on help twice as often to three-year-olds as to four-year-olds, and four times as often as to five-year-olds. Her help fell away as each child's own skill grew, but the study itself only describes this pattern; it does not prove that fading the help is what caused the skill to grow.

● ● ● Evidence: Early signal

A controlled UK classroom study using multiple tutors and separating fading support from growing competence would test the observed pattern.



WHAT HAPPENED

The help fell away as the children grew more able

One tutor sat one-to-one with 30 children, aged three, four and five, and helped each of them build a wooden block pyramid. She followed one rule: always try telling before showing, and only step in more directly when a verbal instruction failed. She never used a fixed script; each child's own success or failure decided her next move.

Share of constructions the child completed with no help at all



Direct, hands-on help fell in step: a median of 12 instances per child at age 3, halving to 6 at age 4, and halving again to 3 at age 5 (twice as often, then four times as often, as with the oldest group). This is a descriptive pattern from one study, not a trial comparing faded help against fixed help (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976).

The moves she used

- 1

Draw them in

Got the child interested in the task itself, weaning them off whatever else they were playing with.
- 2

Shrink the task

Took on the parts still beyond the child, leaving only the parts they could manage themselves.
- 3

Point out the mismatch

Marked what didn't fit yet, rather than fixing it herself, so the child could see and correct it.
- 4

Step back and confirm

Once a child had it, she mainly checked finished work. The paper's own words: her role "withers away".

Across your routines and your children

The study observed one tutor helping one child at a time with a wooden block puzzle. It was not a trial of fading against any other approach. What follows are sensible ways the same pattern, show fully, then talk it through, then step back, could work in your setting: worth trying, not proven.

Routine	How the pattern could apply
Construction & small-world play	The closest match to what was tested. Build alongside a child once, then only complete the tricky piece for them, then just point at what looks off, then let them finish alone.
Self-help (coats, zips, shoes)	Do the zip up fully once. Next time, do all but the last pull and let them finish it. Then just talk them through it. Then watch and confirm.
Mark-making & early letters	Model the full letter, then give a dotted guide, then a verbal reminder of the starting point only, then let them write it unaided.
Turn-taking & sharing	Model the words first, then prompt with just one cue word, then step back and watch, then talk it through together afterwards.

Adapting to your children

EAL or SEND children

The study's own tutor stayed longer at the "show" stage with any child who was struggling; there's no reason to rush a child off direct help before they're ready.

Key-group or small-group time

The tutor in the study adjusted her help to each child individually rather than running one script for the group; rotate your attention the same way.

Confident, older-in-cohort children

Could reasonably start at the "tell" stage rather than "show", though this specific starting point was not tested directly.

Any setting, no extra resources

The original study used wooden blocks and a low table. No technology or special kit is needed to try this.

Start with one: pick a self-help routine you currently finish FOR a child. Next time, do every step but the last one, and let them complete just that final part before you confirm it together.

A clear pattern, in one small, dated study

Early signal

This rates the evidence's firmness, not our endorsement of the idea. The falling-support pattern is clear and consistent within this one study, but the study itself was not designed to test whether fading the help is what caused the children's growing skill.

- There was no comparison group of any kind: every child received the same contingent, fading style of help. The study's own authors describe it as a description of what happened, not a test of a hypothesis.
- Just one tutor, one of the paper's own authors, worked with all 30 children, split into only 10 per age group, in a research playroom in the United States in the 1970s, not a UK early years setting.
- The pattern shows that help fell as children got older and more able, not that pulling help away is what made them more capable. Age, practice and growing skill are all tangled together here.

What that means for you: treat the sequence itself (show fully, then talk them through it, then step back and confirm) as a well-named, sensible way to run adult support, worth trying and watching, not as a proven technique for speeding up a child's learning.

TRY IT THIS WEEK

Your first small step

THIS WEEK

Pick one thing you currently finish FOR a child. Next time, do every step but the last one, and let them complete just that final part before you confirm it together.

Try it and watch: notice the moment your hand can come away completely, and the child carries on without it. That is your own evidence, not the study's.

Go deeper

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