

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY: NINE COMMON PLAY PATTERNS

Children’s play has repeated patterns that support learning and growth. These patterns are play “needs” that children use to explore and learn. You could consider them an “urge” a child expresses through play. These patterns can seem random, repetitive or uncontrollable.

THE COMMON PATTERNS ARE: ¹⁴

- 1. Containment/dumping:** putting things in containers or closing them into a space, then dumping them out
- 2. Connection and disconnection:** joining things together or destroying whole things
- 3. Movement:** seeing and testing how things and their own bodies move—this could be throwing, jumping, climbing, etc.
- 4. Transporting:** collecting and carrying things in hand, in a container, in a wagon, etc.
- 5. Hiding:** seeing and hiding things or people, including themself
- 6. Rotating:** watching or making themselves or objects move in circles or rotate
- 7. Placing:** lining things up or placing in some sort of order, e.g. sticks, toys
- 8. Body positioning:** getting a different perspective by changing your orientation, like by lying down looking up at trees or sky, or hanging upside down
- 9. Changing:** transforming items and materials to make them look or feel different, like mixing sand or rocks and water, water and paper, or cooking for real or pretend

When you observe and identify these patterns, you can let them happen without interrupting. If the play urge is happening in a space where it is unsafe or not okay, give the child an option to do it in another spot, or with other materials. For example, if a child is throwing rocks, you could say, “It looks like you really want to throw things. Let’s throw in this spot and see what sound it makes,” or “Let’s get the cotton balls or pine cones out so you can throw with other people around.”