

Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning
Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2012
10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_1779
Norbert M. Seel

Dunst, C. J., & Raab, M. (2012). Interest-based child participation in everyday learning activities. In N. M. Seel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the sciences of learning* (pp. 1621-1623). New York: Springer: Springer

Interest-Based Child Participation in Everyday Learning Activities

Carl J. Dunst¹  and Melinda Raab¹ 

(1) Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute, 8 Elk Mountain Road, Asheville, NC 28804, USA

 Carl J. Dunst (Corresponding author)

Email: cdunst@puckett.org

Email: dunst@puckett.org

 Melinda Raab

Email: mraab@puckett.org

Without Abstract

Synonyms

Circumscribed interests; Curiosity; Intense interests; Personal interests; Perseverative interests; Situational interests

Definition

The word *interest* when used by educators and psychologists refers to the characteristics of a person, object, or event that engages a person in sustained interaction with objects or others. Interests include a person's likes, preferences, favorites, affinity toward, or attraction to a subject, topic, or activity. Displays of interests typically include enjoyment, pleasure, and satisfaction as well as *emotional involvement* in a task or activity.

More than 100 years ago, John Dewey in his book, *The School and Society* (1899), noted that children's natural curiosities such as "interest in conversation, or communication; in inquiry or finding out things; in making things, or construction; and in artistic expression [are the] natural resources, the uninvested capital, upon which depends the active growth of the child" (pp. 47-48). Dewey's description captures the key features of *interest-based child learning*; namely, active child participation in everyday activities that are either contexts for interest expression or are interesting to a child, and which provide opportunities for situated learning (Göncü 1999).

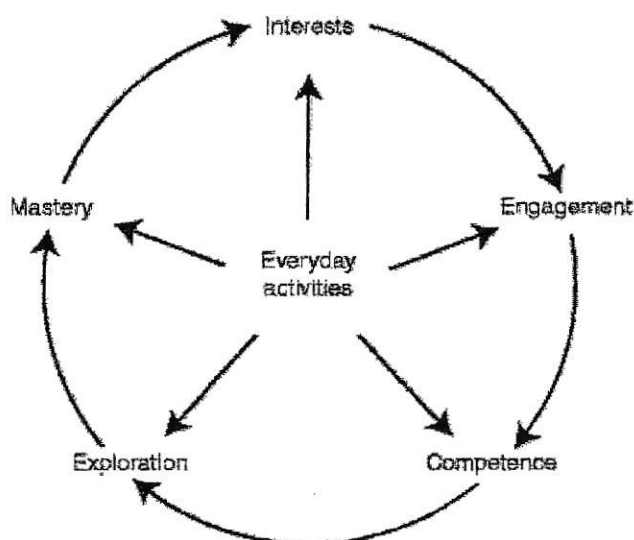
Theoretical Background

Interests have played a central role in theories of child learning and development for more than a century (see Silvia 2006). Theorists have described different types of interests in different ways. Krapp, Hidi, and Renninger (1992) differentiate between *personal* and *situational* interests and describe how both types of interests are related to one another. Personal interests are the characteristics of a person that influence his or her engagement in interactions with the social or nonsocial environment. Situational interests refer to the interestingness of the social or nonsocial environment that evoke or encourage interactions with people or objects. The influences of both types of interests are bidirectional, transactional, and mutually reinforcing. The consequences of

participation in interest-based activity include, but are not limited to, improved competence, increased motivation, and personal well-being.

Infants as young as 2 or 3 months of age demonstrate personal interests as well as interest in their surroundings. Their interests are manifested in terms of their preferences for certain positions, sounds, and sights; prolonged attention to people, objects, and events; and emotional expression. Interests are often accompanied by laughter, excitement, and intense engagement in activity and play. Both *contingency detection and awareness* appear to play important roles in how interests are reinforced by child engagement in everyday activity (Dunst et al. 2008).

Child development theory and research on interests, engagement, exploration, and mastery motivation were used to develop the model shown in Fig. 1 (Dunst 2006). *Everyday activities* that children experience as part of family and community life are viewed as sources of situationally interesting social and nonsocial events and the contexts for personal interest expression. According to the model, interest-based child participation in everyday activity provides the context for sustained *engagement* in interactions with people and material. Sustained engagement in turn provides a child the opportunity to practice *existing competence* and learn *new behavior*. As part of competence expression and learning, a child has an opportunity to *explore* the consequences of his or her abilities and to develop a sense of *mastery*. A sense of mastery in turn is likely to strengthen personal interests and transform situationally interesting everyday activity into personal interests.



Interest-Based Child Participation in Everyday Learning Activities. Fig. 1 Model for depicting the key features of interest-based everyday child learning

The model shown in Fig. 1 and the relationships between the elements in the model were the foundations to an approach to early childhood intervention that identifies both children's interests and the everyday activities that are contexts for interest-based learning where learning is facilitated by parents and other caregivers increasing child participation in the activities (Dunst 2006). The benefits include, but are not limited to, improved child and parent competence and confidence.

Important Scientific Research and Open Questions

Research and practice on young children's interests pose several challenges that are not major issues in studies of older children and adults. Whereas the difference between personal and situational interests is relatively easy to conceptualize and operationalize in studies of older children and adults, the differences are not as clear in studies of younger children and especially infants and toddlers. The ways in which situational interests become personal interests among young children is another area where research is needed.

There is a need for better designed measures of young children's interests. Most approaches rely on parents' reports. Observations of young children's interactions with their social and nonsocial environment show clear preferences for certain material or activity. An observational measure of young children's interests may therefore be of potential value in studies of interests and interest-based learning. Comparative studies using different assessment methods could prove important in terms of which methods best capture children's interests. These types of studies could include concomitant measures of child engagement, behavior competence, exploration, and mastery to determine which types of interest assessment methods best explain variations in those concomitant measures.

There are a number of challenges related to promoting professionals' and parents' use of interest-based everyday learning activities to promote child development, and especially with young children with delays or disabilities. Most planned interventions implemented by professionals or prescribed to parents by professionals are predominately adult-directed. In contrast, interest-based child learning is mostly child-directed. In those cases where child interests are incorporated into child-learning activities, adults use mostly situational interests to entice or evoke child engagement (e.g., introducing attractive toys to a child). Personal interests are rarely used to decide which kinds of everyday activity are best suited for child learning despite the fact that personal interests are more important determinants of child behavior and skill acquisition (Raab and Dunst 2007). Both research and everyday experiences "tell us" that people in general and young children more specifically become increasingly proficient in their performance when engaged in activities that are personally interesting.

Another area of important research and practice with young children is a better understanding of how personal and situational interests influence one another, and how they have independent, interactive, and mediating effects on child learning and development. Studies of young children that include measures of both types of interests could be highly informative.

Cross-References

[Curiosity and Exploration](#)

[Dewey, John \(1858–1952\)](#)

[Everyday Learning Instruction and Technology Designs](#)

[Informal Learning](#)

[Interests and Learning](#)

[Learning in Informal Settings](#)

[Situated Learning](#)

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