

Early Years Play Activities

A Bucket Full of Surprises

(Based on an article by Gina Davies)

The first stage teaches children to focus their attention on the adult-led agenda quickly. That is the point. It must happen fast. We don't want to have to resort to persuasion, bribery or compulsion; we want the children to be irresistibly drawn. The bucket is a device that allows us to bring that about.

It is a non-see-through container that holds a selection of small wind-up, pop-up, musical or mechanical toys the children will find visually appealing, but which they have never seen before. Novelty value is key, so you need to build up a collection of lots of different items to maintain the element of surprise.



Having cleared the environment of distractions, you seat the children opposite you, with any supporting adults by their side. In keeping with good visual communication practice, you start by drawing a bucket on a little whiteboard and writing 'bucket' underneath. Then you set the scene by singing a song or reciting a rhyme before taking the lid off the bucket and pulling out one of its secrets. You keep language to a minimum at this point because you want children to look at the object, pay attention to it and engage with visually. Then you are teaching directly to a visual learning strength. Any additional language can come later.

The children might look at it for a minute or so. You will be looking at it and the supporting adults will be looking at it, so you all have the same shared experience. Then you put it back in the bucket and pick out something else. It takes maybe two or three minutes to do three objects in a row. Then you say: 'It's finished,' sign 'finished' and cross the bucket off on the board and move on to whatever else the children were doing.

Crucially, you never hand the toys over, since the children are still at the stage where they can only do one thing at a time. If you allow them to interact with the toy, that will absorb their attention and you will have broken the dynamic that connected them to you.

Likewise, you avoid including anything in the bucket that the children already possess and love playing with. Imagine the distress of a child, whose special interest is Thomas the Tank Engine, when he sees his favourite toy held up in front of him, but out of bounds