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# The Importance of Repetition in Childhood





## The Crucial Role of Repetition in Early Childhood

Repetition, the act of repeating the same activity or experience multiple times, is fundamental to early childhood development and supports holistic growth. Children are intrinsically hardwired to engage in repetitive play and revisit familiar experiences as a way to achieve deep and meaningful learning. The brain benefits from repeated interactions, which help reinforce neural connections crucial for cognitive development and emotional regulation. Rather than constantly introducing new activities, focusing on repeated play and consistent experiences allows children to explore, master, and deeply understand concepts, providing a solid foundation for future learning.

Children vividly demonstrate their need for repetition through their constant requests for the same experiences. Whether it's asking for "one more time!" or "again, again, again!" in response to a favorite song or movie, or engaging in the same play schemas repeatedly, children show us in countless ways that they thrive on repetition. These repeated requests and behaviors are not just about preference; they are a natural part of how children learn and grow. By revisiting the same activities and experiences, children reinforce their learning, gain confidence, and develop a deeper understanding of the world around them. Embracing this need for repetition helps support their holistic development and nurtures their innate desire to explore and learn.



## Repetition in Play: The Brain's Preferred Way to Learn

Observations of children's play often reveal a strong inclination toward repetitive activities, which plays a critical role in their learning and development and is a fundamental aspect of how children process and internalize new information.

**Cognitive Development:** Repetitive play helps children consolidate their understanding of concepts. For instance, when children repeatedly build and rebuild structures with blocks, they explore different spatial relationships, cause-and-effect scenarios, and problem-solving strategies. This repetition allows them to refine their cognitive skills and better grasp abstract concepts.

**Language Development:** Engaging in repetitive play also enhances language development. A study by Sarah A. O'Connor and Michael J. McCormick (2013) showed that when children repeatedly act out the same scenarios during pretend play, they use and reinforce specific vocabulary and sentence structures. This repetition aids in the acquisition and retention of language.



**Emotional and Social Development:** Repetitive play offers children a way to process and manage their emotions. For example, children who frequently reenact challenging situations, such as being lost or finding a friend, use this play to work through their feelings and gain a sense of control. This type of play can also help them understand social roles and develop empathy.

**Motor Development:** Repetitive play is crucial for developing fine and gross motor skills. Activities such as stacking blocks, drawing, or playing with sand repeatedly help children refine their hand-eye coordination, dexterity, and overall motor control. A study by Nancy J. E. Clark (2010) highlighted that repetitive motor activities contribute significantly to the development of motor skills and coordination in young children.



Dr. Karyn B. Purvis (1951–2016) was a developmental psychologist and a renowned expert in the field of child development, attachment, and trauma.

"Now what we know from research is that it takes 400 repetitions of an act or a learning skill, 400 times, to get one new synapse. Or -would you like to know an option - there's an option. OR, 12 repetitions with joy and laughter and you get a synapse because there's **a release of a chemical dopamine.**"

- Karyn Purvis

# Repetition for Vocabulary Acquisition & Comprehension

The 2011 study by Jessica S. Horst, Kate L. Parsons, and Nicola S. Bryan focused on the impact of repeated storybook reading on vocabulary acquisition in young children. The researchers worked with children aged three to five years and divided them into two groups to assess how repetition influences word learning.



**Group 1:** Children in this group were **read the same storybook** three times over the course of one week. This story contained specific target vocabulary words that the researchers wanted the children to learn.



**Group 2:** Children in this group were **read three different storybooks** within the same week. These books contained the same target vocabulary words as those in the first group but presented in different narrative contexts.

## Results

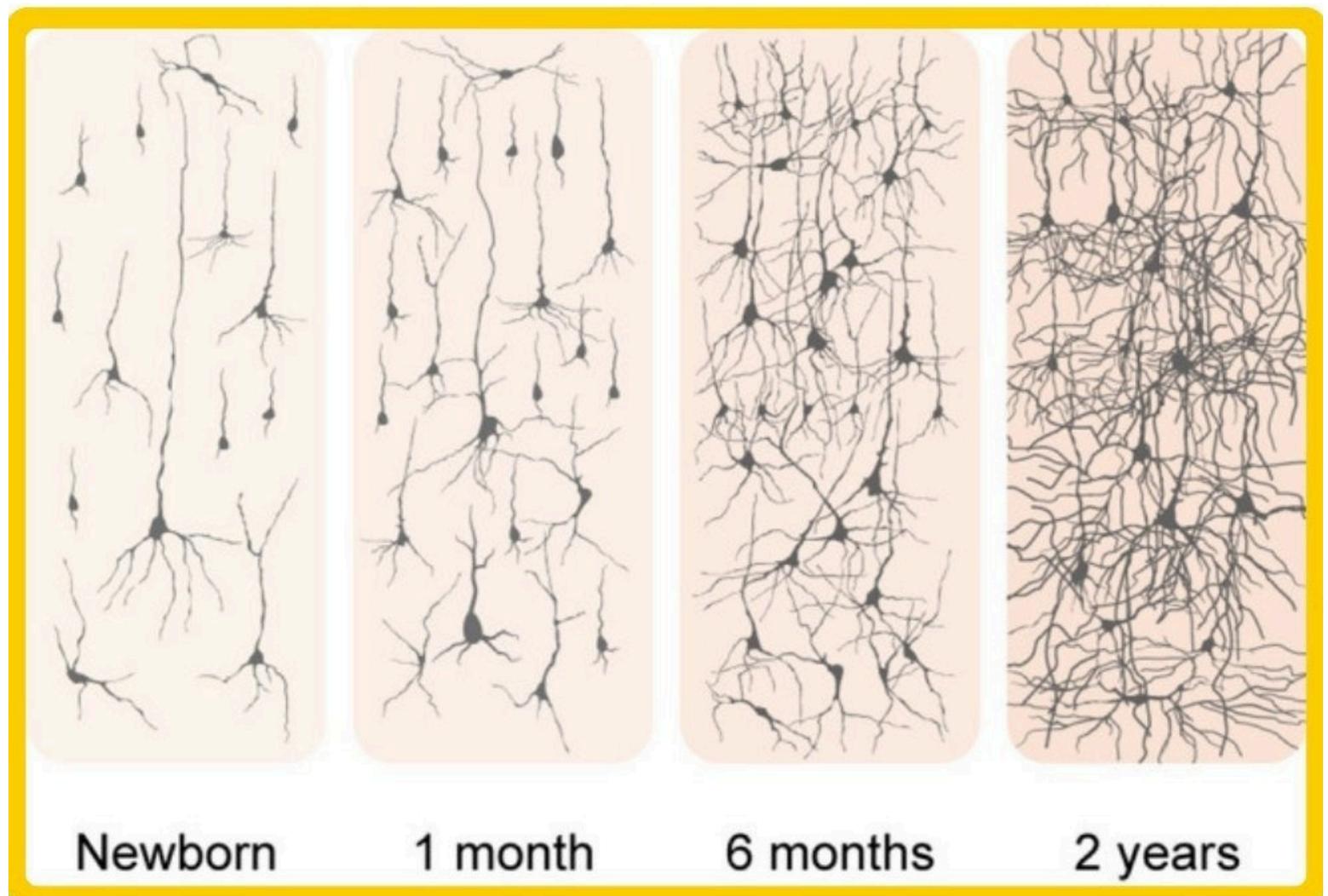
The study found that children in Group 1, who heard the same story repeatedly, demonstrated significantly better retention and understanding of the target vocabulary than those in Group 2, who were exposed to the same words in different stories.

The conclusion drawn from this study was that repeated exposure to the same story in a consistent narrative context is more effective for vocabulary acquisition in young children than encountering the same words in varying contexts. The familiarity and predictability of the repeated story likely helped the children focus on the new words and understand their meanings better. The study highlights how repetition, by providing consistent context and multiple opportunities to process new words, is a powerful tool in enhancing early language development.

# Repetition is Important at Any Age, But Why is it Particularly Important in Early Childhood?

**Foundation of Learning:** Rapid brain development occurs in the first five years with 90% of the human brain fully developed. During this significant time, the brain is being “hardwired” as to how it will work and function based upon experiences and sensory input. After age 5, the brain focuses more on refining and consolidating existing skills and knowledge,

**Repetition** is crucial for brain growth and development as it strengthens neural connections, enhances synaptic plasticity, and lays the foundation for learning & memory.



**Center for Excellence in Brain Science and Intelligence Technology, Chinese Academy of Science 2022**

The scans and study reveals that from birth to age two, the brain experiences rapid synaptic growth, forming numerous connections essential for cognitive and emotional development. Repetition plays a crucial role in this process, as repeated experiences and activities help strengthen and reinforce synaptic pathways.

Age Group	Average Repetitions Needed for Learning	Reasons for Difference	Sources
<b>Infants</b>	30-50 repetitions	Early Brain Development: Infants are in the early stages of brain development. Their neural pathways are forming, and they require extensive repetition to build foundational skills and recognize patterns.	Goswami, U. (2008). Cognitive Development and Learning in Children: A Review.** Psychology Press
<b>Toddlers</b>	20-30 repetitions	Developing Cognitive Skills: Toddlers have emerging cognitive abilities but still need frequent repetition to solidify new concepts and skills. Their memory and attention are still developing.	Berk, L. E. (2009). Child Development.** Pearson Education
<b>Preschoolers</b>	15-25 repetitions	Enhanced Cognitive and Language Skills: Preschoolers have improved memory and attention compared to toddlers but still benefit greatly from repetition to grasp and retain new information.	National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2020). Developmentally Appropriate Practice.** NAEYC
<b>School-Aged Children</b>	10-20 repetitions	Refined Cognitive Functions: School-aged children have better-developed cognitive functions, including memory and attention. They can handle more complex tasks with fewer repetitions.	Piaget, J. (1976). The Child and Reality: Problems of Genetic Psychology.** Basic Books
<b>Teenagers</b>	10-15 repetitions	Mature Cognitive Functions: Teenagers have advanced cognitive abilities, including improved problem-solving and memory skills, reducing the need for frequent repetition.	Spear, L. P. (2013). Adolescent Neurodevelopment.** Current Directions in Psychological Science
<b>Adults</b>	5-10 repetitions	Fully Developed Cognitive Abilities: Adults have fully matured cognitive processes, including efficient memory and attention, allowing them to learn new concepts with fewer repetitions.	Sowell, E. R., et al. (2003). In Vivo Evidence for Post-Adolescent Brain Maturation.** Nature Neuroscience

# How the Brain Grows & Develops Through Repetition

## Strengthens Neural Connections:

Repetition reinforces neural pathways in the brain. When children repeatedly engage in activities like reading or practicing motor skills, the neural connections involved become stronger. This process helps solidify learning and memory.

**Enhances Memory Formation:** Repetition aids in transferring information from short-term to long-term memory. Repeated exposure to new concepts or vocabulary improves children's ability to recall and use this information over time.

## Facilitates Skill Mastery:

Repetitive practice is crucial for mastering new skills. Deliberate repetition helps children refine their motor, cognitive, and social abilities, leading to greater expertise and proficiency.

## Promotes Emotional Regulation:

Repetition in play helps children develop strategies for managing their emotions. Engaging in repetitive scenarios where they practice emotional responses helps them learn to navigate their feelings and respond appropriately in various situations.



**Supports Language Acquisition:** Repetition is key to language development. Children who encounter specific vocabulary or language structures repeatedly in context are more likely to remember and use these words effectively.



## The (Negative) Impact of Modern-Day Interference on Repetitive Child-Led Play

In today's fast-paced world, children are often bombarded with an array of new activities, toys, and experiences. While the intention behind this constant influx is to provide stimulation and opportunities for growth, it can inadvertently disrupt the natural benefits of repetitive, child-led play. **Children thrive on repetition because it allows them to deeply engage with and master concepts at their own pace.** However, when they are continuously introduced to new and novel experiences, it can fragment their focus and reduce their ability to revisit and fully explore familiar activities. **This barrage of new stimuli can hinder their capacity to develop a deep understanding of concepts and skills.** Instead of fostering meaningful learning, the rapid succession of new activities often leads to surface-level engagement, where children may not have the opportunity to consolidate their learning through repeated practice and exploration.

### Rote Memorization and Its Limitations

Rote memorization, often employed through repetitive use of charts and flashcards, is another area **where repetition can become counterproductive.** In this approach, children repeatedly view and recall symbols or facts without necessarily understanding their context or relevance. While rote memorization can lead to the short-term retention of information, **it often lacks depth and fails to connect learning to meaningful concepts.** Children may memorize symbols and sequences, but this type of repetitive learning does not foster a deeper understanding or application of knowledge in varied contexts. Unlike child-led play, which encourages exploration and meaningful repetition, rote memorization focuses on surface-level recall, which can limit a child's ability to apply learned concepts creatively and effectively in different situations. This method often misses the opportunity for children to engage in thoughtful exploration and connection-making, essential for holistic and profound learning.



## Why Weekly Themes in ECE Do Not Align With Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Weekly themes are often used in early childhood education as a way to structure learning activities around a specific topic each week. However, this approach can be contradictory to how young children naturally learn and develop.

Children's learning is not compartmentalized; they don't separate concepts into neat categories like adults do. Instead, they learn holistically, integrating knowledge across various domains through repeated, hands-on experiences. Weekly themes can limit this deep, integrative learning by moving too quickly from one topic to another before children have had the opportunity to fully explore, understand, and internalize new concepts.

Young children thrive on repetition. It's through revisiting the same activities, concepts, and ideas that they build a deeper understanding and mastery of skills. When themes change weekly, it disrupts this natural process, potentially leaving children with a surface-level grasp rather than a solid foundation.

Moreover, the rapid pace of weekly themes is more suited to the adult's need for variety and organization than to the child's need for consistency and repetition. For adults, it can be tempting to think that new topics keep children engaged, but in reality, young learners benefit far more from prolonged exposure to the same ideas, which allows them to explore these ideas from different angles and through various experiences over time.

In contrast, a more developmentally appropriate approach would be to allow children to delve deeply into topics at their own pace, encouraging them to revisit and expand on their learning naturally, leading to richer and more meaningful educational experiences. **(Read more about this topic in our Emergent Curriculum Document).**



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