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Key concepts in 2 mins

Scaffolding



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Scaffolding is a concept with a specific meaning - we should only use it for that purpose.

Scaffolding is a metaphor referring to a particular way that adults or more sophisticated peers support children with their learning (Bruner, 1957; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; Vygotsky, 1978).

Pioneering Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget focused on how children moved from one level of development to the next. In contrast, Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky proposed that children have a 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD): a child might be able to do something with adult support, that they cannot yet do alone. The American researcher Jerome Bruner coined the term 'scaffolding' to describe what adults do to support children's learning in the ZPD.

What it is and what it isn't

The EEF define scaffolding as: 'a metaphor for temporary support that is removed when it is no longer required', providing 'enough support so that pupils can successfully complete tasks that they could not yet do independently'.

Scaffolding is sometimes misused.

This could be, in part, because it's not an entirely accurate metaphor. The scaffolding we see in the street enables workers to fix the roof or paint the building - it does not build the building. However, (educational) scaffolding refers to the process of 'building' the child's development. Also, the scaffolding we see outside a building is usually removed all at once. Educational scaffolding is not: it is taken away incrementally when no longer needed.

It's always worth knowing the limitations of a metaphor.



Key points about scaffolding:

- It is a short-term, targeted intervention when we offer temporary assistance to help children complete a skill or part of a skill.

Supporting, on the other hand, is a long-term process that extends beyond a specific task or goal.

- It involves breaking down a specific skill into its smaller parts. As the child achieves each smaller part, the support for it is removed. Eventually the child will be able to complete the skill independently, without needing any scaffolding.

Supporting, on the other hand, involves consistently providing resources, opportunities, and guidance to ensure the child's holistic growth and success.

- Scaffolding emphasises the child's zone of proximal development (ZPD). It aims to bridge the gap between what they can do with support, but not without it.

Supporting a child's learning, on the other hand, focuses on various aspects of the child's development (including cognitive, social, emotional, and physical).

Learning to put on a coat - scaffolding in action.

1. Put the child's coat on for them, maybe giving a basic commentary: 'Let's put one arm in – good - now the other arm – good - and let's zip it up – all done!'
2. When they seem ready, work with the child on putting one arm in for themselves, giving verbal cues / commentary. Assist where necessary – *this* is the scaffolding.
3. When they can do it independently, let them. This is removing that piece of scaffolding.
4. Then do the next arm and, finally, fastening up using the same sort of approach.

For each child, removing each piece of scaffolding will have its own timeline.

Further reading:

family : *Scaffolding in the Early Years* by Ruby Veazey (2021)

The EEF blog on Scaffolding by Gary Aubin (2022)