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Experiential Learning During Early Childhood Play: Free Play, Problem Solving, and Executive Function

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Abstract

Experiential learning is rooted in free play that encourages problem solving skills through discovery of causal relationships and practice of self-control.¹ During play, children learn to self-regulate their emotional responses by developing appropriate problem-solving techniques when encountering challenges. Moreover, play allows children to experiment through trial and error, observe consequences of their actions, and engage in flexible thinking.^{2,3,4} Planning and implementing sequences of goal-directed actions during play not only facilitates children's problem-solving skills,^{1,5} but also involves working memory and planning aptitude, typically associated with higher order executive functions.^{2,5} Thus, play is intrinsically interconnected with problem solving and executive functioning, though the two elements have distinguishable relevance. Problem solving requires self-regulation, ability to identify an obstacle, projecting an outcome based on previous experiences, and tailoring one's behavior to achieve a goal.¹ Executive functions, on the other hand, utilize the information gathered from both the discoveries made during play and problem solving to integrate higher order cognitive strategies into overseeing challenging life tasks and goal-directed behaviors.^{4,6} Examining the relation between free play and problem solving highlights the impact that early experiential learning has on the development of executive functioning as skills become more refined through practice.

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Abstract

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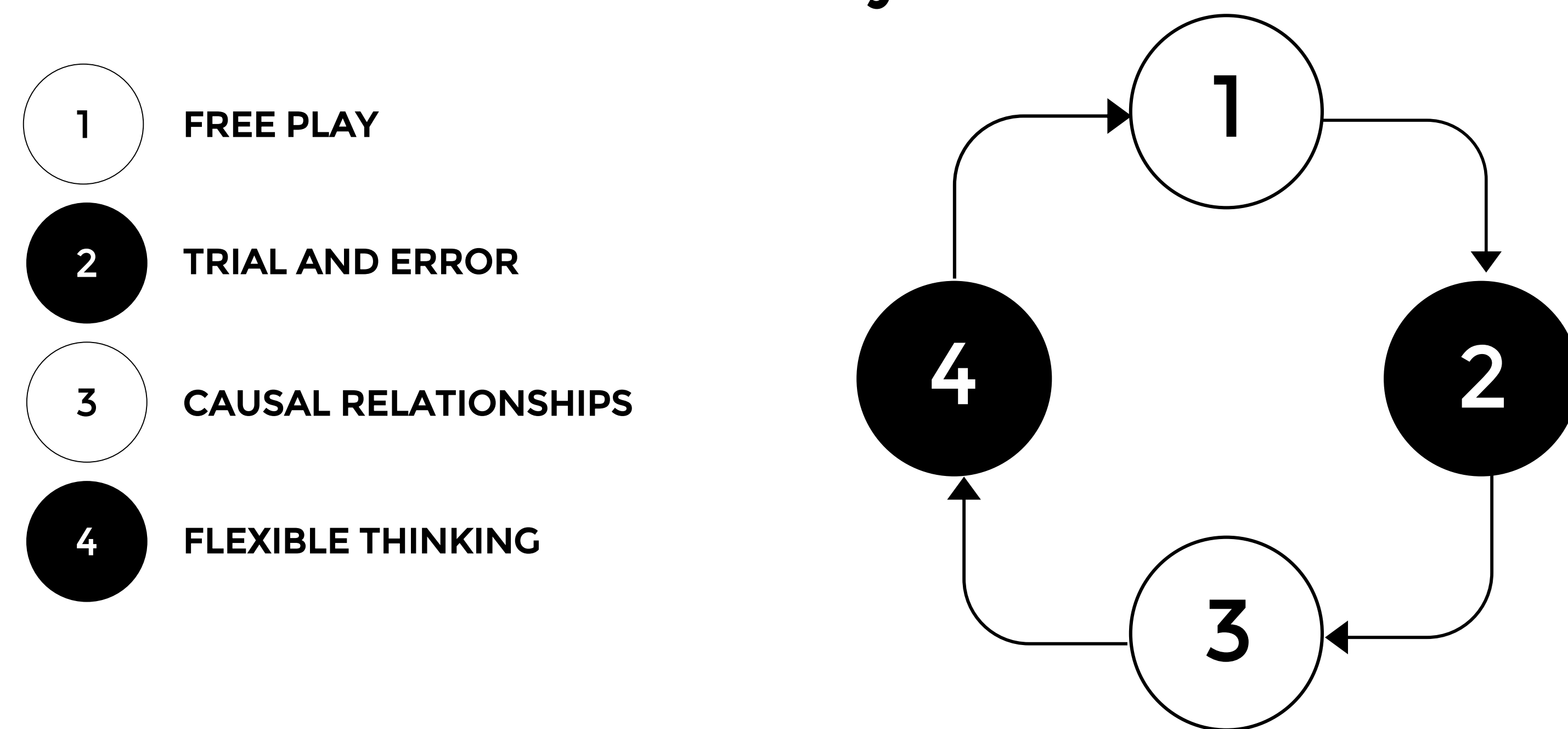
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A child will naturally engage with toys, objects, and people around them. During the early stages of development, a child can execute decision making processes by crawling toward an object or person. A child will gain information through sensory exploration.

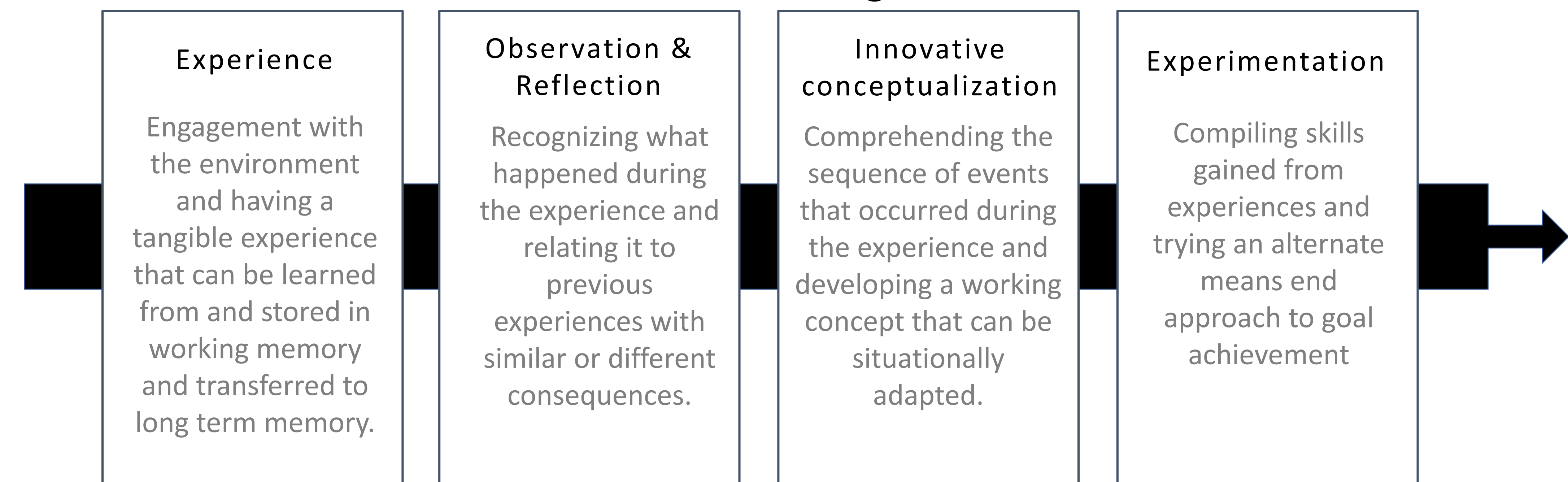


Children learn about the mechanisms in their environment and develop an understanding of social and emotional expectations as they practice interacting with objects around them and observing reactions.

Problem Solving Within Play



Experiential Learning



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