

How environment in the early years influences template development

Why toddlers lick dogs!



Have you ever been in a room when a toddler meets a dog for the first time? If you have, you will have seen something like this: Once someone tells them that ‘thing’ is a dog, they start saying “dog, dog, dog...” over and over. They then toddle over to the dog and proceed to touch it, smell it, and to the disgust of the adults in the room, they will probably lick the dog. WHY? This article will explain a big part of the reason that toddlers lick dogs. (I wouldn’t suggest knowing the full reason. I mean, who knows if dogs actually do taste good; have you licked one lately?)

What this toddler is doing when they see, hear, feel, lick, experience the dog, is building what we call a ‘template’. We build hundreds of thousands of templates throughout our life, about pretty much everything, and are constantly referring back to them. Though we make templates all our life, the most significant time for forming them is in the first three years of life. This article will explain how we build templates, and the significance of referring back to them.

In the context of your classroom, *templates* are important to understand both for your students and for yourself. Understanding templates can help us be mindful of why some children react quite uniquely to sounds, smells, colours, words etc. It can help us unpack stereotypes that we or our students may hold. And if we understand how templates develop, then we can begin to work out how to develop new, more appropriate templates. Though this article will give you a good overview, you need to understand that this subject is extremely complex. For extended training around this subject, please contact the author.

When we are born we have around 86 billion brain cells. At birth some of these cells are connected, but most are not. When a cell is not connected, it is unable to function. So to function, we need to create connections between brain cells. Templates are essentially a network of thousands of cells connected together. What is really important to know, is that templates develop because of the things we observe,

hear, feel etc. Our experience dictates which templates develop in our brain.

To help you understand this concept of experience dictating template development, we will go back to the toddler example. Imagine now there are two toddlers in the same room. Both toddlers see, hear, taste... the same dog. Toddler A gets a lick from the dog. But Toddler B, for whatever reason, gets growled at by the dog. So what we have here are two toddlers building different templates, because of their individual experiences. Toddler A has connected ‘dog’ with feeling happy. Toddler B however, formed connections between ‘dog’ and feeling scared. (Please remember we are simplifying this concept, many other variables come into this situation, so keep your mind open.)

So, in our simple world of Toddler A = Happy Dog Template and Toddler B = Scary Dog Template, let’s now consider the impact these initial templates can have for us throughout our life. Let’s take Toddler A and Toddler B out for a walk. In the distance is a dog. Both toddlers see the dog. They have no direct interaction with the dog; they are merely sighting it from a distance. Now this is where we realise why they are called templates. It is because we refer back to them, so that our brain doesn’t have to constantly build new templates at every interaction (thank goodness - imagine having to lick a dog every time you see one!).

So both toddlers sight the dog. What their brain essentially does is it searches for the ‘template’ of that thing. Toddler A searches and finds their template. As they ignite their template for ‘dog’ they also ignite the connecting cells. You might hear the toddler say ‘woof’, or they might put their hand up to their face where they were licked. What will also happen for Toddler A, is they connect and ignite their happy brain cells, so they experience a happy feeling, which reinforces their template around Dog=Happy. But what happens for Toddler B? When they see the dog, they ignite their template, which is different

because they had a different experience that developed their template. So when they see that dog, Toddler B feels scared.

From this example, you can begin to understand how our early environment influences template development, and how influential these templates can be as we refer back to them throughout our life. Remember, we don’t only build templates about dogs. We build them about everything. Very importantly, we develop templates around how safe the world is; about trusting men, women; how people interact with each other; if I make a mistake, will I be encouraged or ridiculed... This subject is immense and is really fascinating to unpack and consider as part of understanding why we do the things we do.

I hope this article has given you some insight into template development, and inspired you to consider yourself, your students and those around you a bit differently. I also hope it helped you answer that really important question of ‘why do toddlers lick dogs!’ 🐕

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