



# From Unknown to Known - The Building Blocks of Learning

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In today's blog, we will explore a child's learning process through the lens of educational theorist Lev Vygotsky. We will look at his [Zone of Proximal Development](#), and understand how as educators and caregivers you are best placed to assist children in their learning process.

Understanding how children transition from not knowing to knowing is useful, especially for those educating youngsters whether within a traditional school setting or in a home environment. Today's focus is on the importance of the teacher/educator within a learning process, and the way in which children's development is boosted by appropriate guidance.

## What is the Zone of Proximal Development?

The Zone of Proximal Development, or ZPD, is an educational theory developed by the influential educational theorist and academic, Lev Vygotsky. ZPD is understood as the distance between a child's capacity to learn and problem-solve independently, and their potential development capacity when learning with adult guidance, or with support from a more capable individual.



There are three stages to the learning process, as understood by Vygotsky's theory, and the learner will be in one of these stages at any given time as they develop. The three types of tasks are:

1. An activity a learner cannot achieve even with external help.
2. A task a learner can accomplish with external help.
3. An activity a learner can undertake without assistance.

Children begin to undertake tasks at the first stage. They learn through observation and explanation given by the more knowledgeable party present. Through observation, they are able to partially undertake the task with assistance. Then as time progresses, and through practice, they are able to complete the activity independently. From there the guide/educator would move the learner onto a task or concept that is more complex, and the process would start again.

Understanding a child's whereabouts on the scale of ZPD allows educators to know where to start when assisting them with progressing in a specific task or topic. This theory recognizes the sliding scale of development, and lets educators assess and work within this framework to ensure continued development.

The educator within this theory is named as the 'more knowledgeable other'. They are the individual/s present during the learning process who are at hand to help and guide the child through the learning process.

## Scaffolding - Supportive Activities

One of the main ways the guide can help the learner is by providing them with supportive activities, or 'scaffolding' tools, as they learn. These are techniques which provide the building blocks required for children to fully understand ideas and accomplish tasks independently.



When a child is in the 'zone' of trying to accomplish a new task, in one of the three stages mentioned above, it is these scaffolding activities that provide the required boost to help the learner pass through the 'zone' towards the accomplishment.

Interestingly, the scaffolding theory explains that the 'scaffold' (or supportive activities) can be removed slowly - as a scaffold would be from a building once it is firmly erected - as a learner is fully able to undertake the task independently. You may scaffold your little learner by helping them practicing certain activities, for example, online [tracing numbers games](#), and then allow the kid to practice them on their own.

A [study by Wood and Middleton \(1975\)](#) showed that scaffolding (assistance) is most effective when the educator adapts the support given, in line with the needs of the learner. The researchers observed a group of four-year-old children trying to build a 3D model shown in a picture. This was too difficult for the youngsters to do alone but with their mothers' support and assistance, they were able to achieve the required task.

The assistance observed included general praise and encouragement, providing detailed instructions and directly showing the child how to do it. No specific way of support worked best but the study found that a combination of all three did. Those that did best were the mothers that left the child to undertake the task mostly alone when they were doing well and only offered advice and suggestions when they were struggling.

## Reassuring for Back-to-Schoolers

This theory could be especially reassuring to those about to send their child back into a school environment after, possibly, a long time at home due to the pandemic. As a parent or caregiver, you may have some concerns about this and it may be comforting to recognize that your child is going back into an environment where their progression is likely to be boosted.



If you are concerned about your child's holistic development, there is a lot to be gained from sending them back into an environment with trained educators and other children.

Research from the United States Census Bureau and the Federal Reserve showed that 68.8% of mothers had to take time off work when schools closed, due to the pandemic, in 2020. Almost 20% of these told the survey it was because they were unable to find suitable childcare arrangements.

With these statistics in mind, alongside an understanding that children are returning to an environment with trained educators experienced in learning and development, it may be a relief for some households in the US to send their children back to school.

## Continuing to Homeschool - The 'More Knowledgeable Other'

However, not all children are returning to school at this time. In light of this, it is important for those continuing with homeschooling to recognize that they too (as well as educators within schools) are ideal 'more knowledgeable others' to guide and boost their child's development.

There are so many learning tools out there to support you in your homeschooling journey, specifically Kid's Academy app and the ready-made [interactive online lessons](#) grouped by subject and topics found throughout this blog and site.

Alongside the resources at your disposal, I think it is also useful for homeschooling households to understand the benefits of children learning within an environment they feel comfortable within.



The Early Years Foundation Stage framework - a set of standards and requirements from the UK government to guide early educators - states that:

“Children learn best when they are healthy, safe and secure, when their individual needs are met, and when they have positive relationships with the adults caring for them.”

If you are homeschooling your child you are at an immediate advantage here. Your child is already familiar and secure within this environment, and therefore the initial warming up and socialization process isn't required. You can dive straight into the learning process.

Speaking within an article for [the Resilient Educator](#), scientist Reinisch references a research study of six and seven-year-olds whose classroom was redecorated over four months.

The study observed the children as the space was altered through engaging displays which showed their art, adding animals and plants, and reorganizing things. The children were proud of their work being displayed and were appreciative of the change in the environment.

Quotes from the children included:

“I feel relaxed. When I'm relaxed I'm more ready to learn.”

“It's like a little living room when the plants are here.”

“Up here [in the reading loft] makes me learn because I read and it's comfortable reading here.”

This study, in my eyes, confirms the benefits of homeschooling environments where children could perhaps have more ownership of the learning environment and, as a result, may feel more ready to learn within 'their' space.

According to a study by [The International Academy of Education](#), which explored How Children Learn, often school activities do not resonate with learners because they are not culturally appropriate to the learner, and therefore the child struggles to assimilate the knowledge and apply it.

When part of a homeschooling environment the educator is at an immediate advantage from this perspective. Presumably, they will be familiar with, if not already share the learners cultural background. As a result, they are better placed to customize the

learning material and explain it in a way that the child will understand in line with their heritage, social background and faith. This can be more difficult in an environment with a diverse learning environment, such as a school.

## Something for Everyone

Whether you are a teacher or parent reading this [parenting blog](#), I hope there is something useful for everyone. Understanding the theory behind the learning process is useful for those homeschooling their children. By ensuring that you observe your child as they learn, and provide the appropriate supportive activities to 'scaffold' their learning, they will be able to transition from what is unknown to known more efficiently and develop in the best way for them.

As a caregiver sending their child back to school this September, this information is useful as it helps you understand the way in which educators will work to aid your child's continued development.

Ensuring children's ongoing holistic development is so important and ultimately, whatever their environment, this should be the overarching aim of the educator. Thank you for reading.

## About the author

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## Links and references

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