

What is "Scaffolding" and the "ZPD"?

JULY 28, 2009 by NOTJUSTCUTE | filed under: CHILD DEVELOPMENT & DAP | [21 Comments](#)

Chances are, if you work with young children you've heard the terms "Scaffolding" and the "Zone of Proximal Development", or "ZPD", but you may be a bit hazy on what they actually mean. Here's a little refresher!





The term, “Zone of Proximal Development” was coined by Russian psychologist and developmental theorist, Lev Vygotsky. He posited that a child’s true intelligence should be measured not by what he could do independently (as in standardized testing) but by what he could do with help from an adult or more competent peer (similar to cooperative learning). The “Zone” refers to the area of growth between what the child can do on his own and his frustration level. For example, imagine the typical preschooler, who can count 1-10, no problem, but those tricky teens trip her up every time. (Eleven, anyone?) She can count 10-20 with your help. That is her ZPD for counting. Eventually, with your guidance, she will be able to count 10-20 independently. Working with this child on something like counting by sevens would be far beyond the ZPD, and cause frustration. Giving too much help with counting 1-10 would be working below the ZPD and would likely cause boredom. Working within the ZPD is ideal because that is the area where the child is already growing. To take directly from the term, “proximal”, the ZPD envelopes those skills that the child is “close” to mastering.

Scaffolding is a term that sprung out of the concept of the ZPD. It refers to the help or guidance from an adult or more competent peer to allow the child to work within the ZPD.

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Just learn more about our Privacy Policy. Scaffolding is erected to support the building process, but

then removed when it is no longer needed. Parents often hold their toddlers hands as they learn to walk. That is scaffolding. You don't find many parents still trying to steady their five year olds as they walk across the living room. That is because the scaffolding, when no longer needed, is removed.

In order to properly scaffold a child, you must come to the child's level and then build from there. Just as a mason would carefully lay brick, row by row, as he climbs the scaffolding, we must build children gradually as we scaffold. Simply jumping in and expecting a child to perform at mastery level is like climbing to the top of the scaffolding and dropping bricks down into place at the bottom! When we don't properly scaffold our children, and hold them to standards above their ZPD, they feel as though every one of those bricks is landing on their heads!

It is important to recognize that the ZPD is very individualized. While the majority of three year olds may have similar skill levels, each one is at a different individual level on any given skill.

Here's an example of scaffolding from the [Sign in](#) activity. For some children, simply identifying their names is a task that requires support. As that task is mastered the child may need encouragement to attempt to write at all, or he may want you to hold his hand as he forms the letters, or he may want a dotted outline to trace, eventually he is writing his name on his own, perhaps with some backwards letters at first, and finally in a conventional manner. Each step is an accomplishment to be celebrated! As the child's ability changes, we change the support we give.

Take some time to think about your own classroom or children. Choose a skill you are working towards mastery with them. Assess what you believe the ZPD is for each of your children and break down the task into individual skills that can be scaffolded. When we properly support our children, they grow both in skill and in confidence!

Photo provided by [001099](#).

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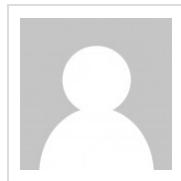
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Comments



MAHEEN KADHEMI *says:*

February 15, 2017 at 6:09 am

14

Hi Amanda,

Very simple explanation for those two confusing terms..so,correct me,I should know the ZDP of each of my students (Individualized task) ,then I will scaffold generally ?
In your (sign in) example,the process of helping the children to write was Scaffolding,but how did you figure out the ZDP of each child ?
Appreciate your explanation as I have chosen the ZDP & Scaffolding for my PGCE assignment ..

Reply



NOTJUSTCUTE *says:*

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February 16, 2017 at 2:58 pm

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I think you get it! The ZPD (zone of proximal development) is the area of mastery just above where the child is right now. So think of the very next step the child could reach with just a little bit of help and practice. The scaffolding is the support you give. Figuring out the ZPD depends on the task. Often, it's based on your observations and experience with the child's past performance. Watch what the child does on his/her own and support the child to do the next step beyond that.

[Reply](#)



GKM says:

February 22, 2017 at 3:07 am

16

Hi Amanda..just coming across your site. I'm reading a book (Theories in Second Language Acquisition)now for a class. It says that a common misconception is that "ZPD is equivalent to scaffolding (or assisted performance)". The mediation sounds like scaffolding to me. It says "Scaffolding, unlike the ZPD, is thought of in terms of the amount of assistance provided by the expert to the novice rather than in terms of the quality and changes in the quality, of mediation that is negotiated between expert and novice. (Stetsenko, 1999)." Can you clear that up for me?? The way you explained it sounds most like what I know to be true.

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February 23, 2017 at 5:40 pm

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The way I think of it is that scaffolding is the action the teacher performs in order to help a child work within his/her ZPD. So, much like the scaffolding used to allow work to be done on buildings in the area where the work needs to be done, a teacher provides scaffolding (support) to help a child reach the ZPD. I hope that helps to clear things up a bit.

[Reply](#)



GKM says:

February 24, 2017 at 1:04 pm

18

Thank you so much! I went to class that next evening and my professor explained it in a very similar way. Thank you for your website. I plan to refer back to it often. 😊

[Reply](#)



HUSNAZULKIFLI says:

April 29, 2018 at 6:11 am

19

Hye Amanda thank you so much on your great explanation. I've been confused

before this is about ZPD and Scaffolding but now i get it. Actually the [Scaffolding](#)
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exist in ZPD concept right its not two different things. Scaffolding is something that existed in ZPD technique. Correct me if I'm wrong.Thank you much Amanda.

[Reply](#)



NOTJUSTCUTE *says:*

May 1, 2018 at 7:20 pm

20

They definitely go together, but are not the same thing. The ZPD originates with the writings of Vygotsky, which while discovered in the 1960s, were written decades before. The ZPD refers to the distance between what a child can do independently and what he can do with help and support. To dissect the term quite literally, it's the area of near development — the development just beyond where they are. Scaffolding was used in this context in the 1960s by Bruner, describing the support we as adults offer to support a child as they progress through the ZPD. Much like the scaffolding on a building, we support a child right where the work is happening, allowing them to move just beyond where they are.

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August 19, 2009 at 6:21 am

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[...] accomplish through the year. It helps me to stay focused on providing opportunities within the ZPD of the children, to develop the skills that have not yet been mastered, while at the same time [...]

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August 16, 2011 at 3:20 pm

[...] influential role models. As we become cognizant of this, we can use our examples to shape and scaffold positive social behavior in the children we love and teach. Here's an example. I was [...]

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[...] Here's a quick list of scaffolding techniques that work in almost any age setting. Not familiar with scaffolding? Check out my post here. [...]

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October 29, 2013 at 2:01 am

[...] spot for teaching with DAP. It's the spot where kids are stretched, but not frustrated. (You can read more about ZPD in this post from the NJC archives.) In order to teach most effectively, which is within the Zone of Proximal Development, one must be [...]

How to Help Your Child Talk: Respond Meaningfully says:

March 3, 2014 at 2:33 pm

[...] the fields of child development and education, we have some fancy terms for this like Scaffolding and The Zone of Proximal Development. The basic explanation, is that the zone of proximal development is the difference between what a [...]

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November 17, 2014 at 8:13 am

[...] year-olds can be scaffolded for tasks beyond their abilities (break down the task into smaller pieces, “You do_____ and [...]”

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March 23, 2018 at 11:39 pm

[...] work it out because they’ll have to in the real world” idea. Children need tools, scaffolding, and encouragement. I don’t think I’ll ever know if my strategies have long lasting [...]

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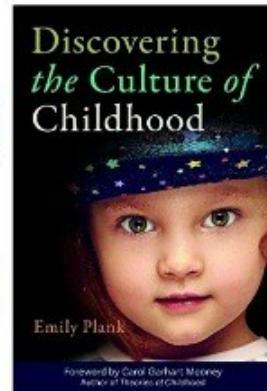
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A close-up photograph of a woman with curly hair smiling warmly at the camera. She is hugging a young child with curly hair who is also smiling. They appear to be indoors, possibly in a home setting.

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Hi there! My name is Amanda...



I'm a writer, teacher,
speaker, trainer, and mom. I
advocate for children and for
childhood, and for

intentional, whole child development.



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