

Connecting with kids who don't want to engage

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Angry Birds, Mario Kart and Animal Crossing are popular digital games that have captured the attention of children the world over. But in a preschool environment, games like these could distract your kids from

engaging in the curriculum, unless you have a teacher who is willing to bend the rules, say University of South Australia researchers.

In a [new paper](#) in *International Journal of Early Childhood*, researchers explored how a group of early childhood teachers successfully connected with [children](#) who were not engaging in learning, finding that tuning in to children's interests can be a game-changer when it comes to motivating learning.

Working with 20–25 preschoolers (who were disengaged with learning activities) the study found that teachers who could connect learning with children's culture, language, motivations, and interests were more likely to create engaged and active learners.

It's an important finding, particularly now, as teachers across the country fight for recognition and support amid an unprecedented [teacher](#) workforce shortage and retention challenges.

UniSA researcher and Deputy Director of the Center for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion (CRESI), Dr. Jamie Sisson, says we need to recognize that teachers across all levels are striving to personalize [student learning](#) and maximize engagement.

"We're at a [critical point](#) for Australia's education system. Teachers are crying out for more support amid heavy workloads and a crowded curriculum. And those who are teaching, are still striving to deliver the best education experience possible," Dr. Sisson says.

"In this study, we showed how a standardized and pre-planned curriculum—something that is often put forward as a solution to relieve the teacher workforce—does not always attract children's interest, leading to a disengagement from learning.

"Here, a team of preschool teachers were struggling to engage with a group of 20–25 young children who were disengaged with the prescribed learning, instead choosing to run about the yard all day.

"While running seems a positive thing for preschoolers, the teachers—even at preschool level—felt a lot of pressure to ensure that the children met their developmental milestones, including learning phonics, so that they could become 'school ready.'"

"But rather than limiting or deterring what the children wanted to do, the teachers shifted the curriculum so that it flexibly addressed the children's interests, culture, and motivations. And the result was that these children became more engaged, involved, open and confident in their learning."

While Angry Birds and other digital games formed the basis of these children's interest in this [case study](#), teachers across all levels of education regularly adjust class plans and teaching approaches to better meet the individual needs of their students.

Dr. Sisson says that the ability to reimagine traditional learning practices and bend the curriculum to meet individual needs should be prioritized and valued in today's challenging teaching environment.

"Our research shines a light on the important intellectual work that early childhood teachers do every day to create engaging learning experiences," Dr. Sisson says.

"When learning experiences are built from children's strengths and connected with their [life experiences](#), they're not only more likely to attract children's engagement and build their skills, but also enhance teachers' work satisfaction. And in a world where we are struggling to do both, this should be a number one priority."

More information: J. H. Sisson, Bringing Children's and Teachers' Agency Together to Create Meaningful Learning That Matters in a Diverse Preschool, *International Journal of Early Childhood* (2023). DOI: [10.1007/s13158-023-00364-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-023-00364-z)

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