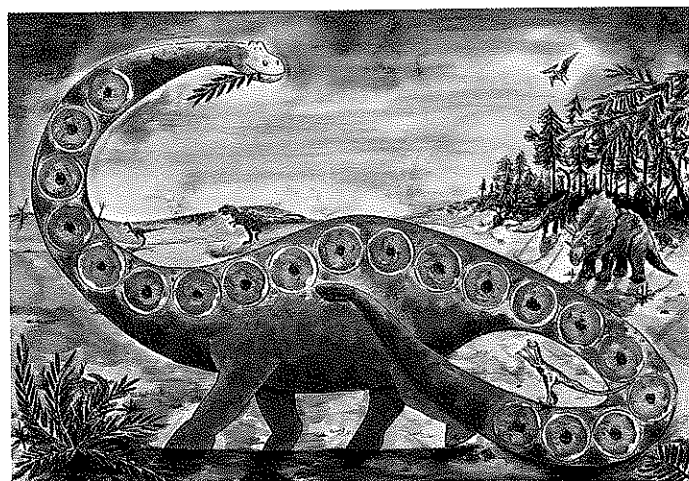
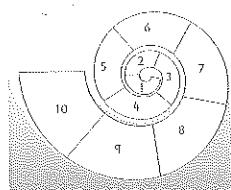


THE IMPORTANCE OF TRIALLING

Sheila Ebbutt



The early childhood maths group has been working with BEAM to develop a set of early years' number track games. There are five A2 track boards, double-sided. On one side there is the track set in a context, such as with dinosaurs, and on the other the plain track. The games are for children in the foundation stage. Here is an example of a game to be played on a numbered spiral track.



Georgeous things

For 2 to 4 players.

You need:

- at least 55 gorgeouis things (buttons, feathers, sequins...)
- a collecting board with ten spaces for each player
- 1 to 10 spinner

Put one gorgeouis thing on 1, two gorgeouis things on 2, three gorgeouis things on 3, and so on, up to 10.

Take turns to:

- spin the spinner and say the number
- take a gorgeouis thing from that number on the board
- put it in a space on your collecting board

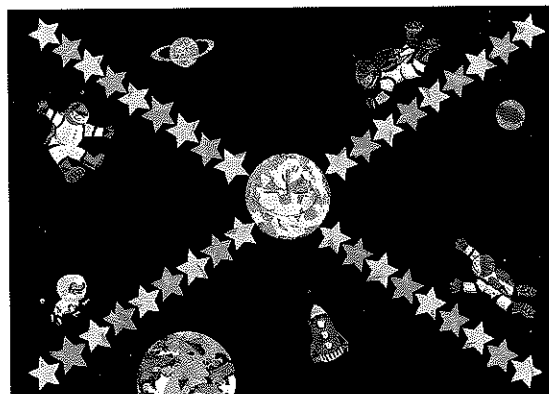
If the gorgeouis things have gone from that number, you can choose where to take one from. Keep going until everybody has collected ten things.

The games were written by experienced practitioners, who know a thing or two about young children. But, as always, we sent the boards and the



games out for trialling. And it's a good thing we did too. No matter how much you know, and how much you think about what you've written, children will always surprise you!

Here are some of the things we found out from our triallers.



Children playing

Older children become experts and teach younger children, so make sure you teach the older children too. The games are mostly for two children - but it's helpful to have two children watching while they are waiting to have a go, while another two play. That way, the next pair already knows how to play, and they may have developed some strategies while watching. Sometimes a game for three worked better with two, or a game for two worked better with four playing as two pairs. But sometimes a game worked well for two, then more children came to join, and the game became too slow. Sometimes a crowd of spectators chipped in and advised.

Lesson for writers: Always try out games and find out the optimum number it needs to play them. Make sure the timing is right - not too quick and not too slow.

Lesson for practitioners: Be prepared to adapt the number of children playing to suit the children. Get children to teach children.

What we missed out in the instructions

Something always happens in a game that you don't think of when you write the instructions. Although adults working with young children have to be endlessly flexible and quick witted, it helps to have predicted some tricky moments.

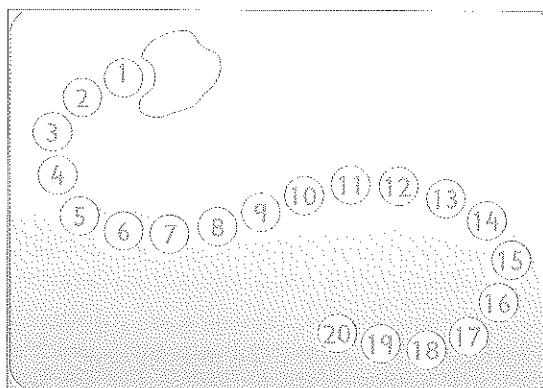
- The instructions say that each child starts with six counters, but doesn't say that the children need to count out the counters first.
- Do you have to throw the exact number to win?
- Where do you start? End?
- What if I've got some counters left over?

Lesson for writers: Always try out games first.

Lesson for practitioners: Be prepared to make up arbitrary rules on the spot.

Winners

Many triallers reported that children liked playing co-operatively, rather than for a winner. This worked particularly well when each player had to remember to do complicated things, like put things on one side of the board. They liked to do these things together. Games were more successful without an air of competition. If there were winners, they preferred first winner, second winner . . . Sometimes the winner could be the one with the most, sometimes the one with the least. The children liked these variations. But often, there was



no clear end to the games, nor a winner. The children just enjoyed the process of playing.

Lesson for writers and practitioners: Don't assume children are competitive. Don't assume children cannot co-operate.

Adapting the games

Many of the triallers changed the games on the hoof with the children. They used dice instead of a spinner, put cards out on the table instead of into a bag, used a spinner instead of taking a handful of counters . . . Some things feel like a good idea when you are writing, but the children can find them cumbersome and an exciting game becomes dull. It's a very subtle thing! We received many suggestions for simplifications and extensions to the games. Many triallers left the board and objects out, and the children adapted the games for themselves.

Lesson for writers: Provide a range of simplifications, extensions and variations. Remember, children often don't learn what you intend them to learn.

Lesson for practitioners: As always, be a lateral thinker and have a dozen alternative ideas up your sleeve.

We developed and trialled games for young children. But the same principles apply to whatever you write for any age children, be it games, activities, lessons or worksheets. Get children to try them and be your critics and reviewers. There is a proliferation of teaching material nowadays - publishing is so much easier, and we all have computers. But so much of the material is not well written or thought out, because it has not been tried out with either teachers or children. Games are particularly subtle in the way they work. Just a small change in the numbers playing, in the rules, in the equipment . . . can make a dull game exciting, and vice versa.

Sheila Ebbutt is a director of BEAM, specialist mathematics publishers and course providers.

The games Sheila refers to in this article are *Number track games* available from BEAM 020 7684 3330 / 3323.