



January Challenge

Welcome to your January Challenge. I've pulled this specific challenge from my upcoming book, 'Purposeful Provision', to support you to introduce some 'slow CPD' for yourself or your team this month. Our focus for this challenge is the tuff spot, specifically, exploring how to use it more efficiently to support deeper learning within a shorter period of time.

I've structured this process over four weeks, but to be clear: this is about making the challenge work for you. Please feel free to extend the timeline or condense it as you see fit. The goal is to enhance your practice and support your team without adding unnecessary pressure to your everyday routine.

Throughout January, I'll be sending various emails and posting on social media. These are designed to offer extra support, help you go deeper into your approach, or provide a moment to reflect and change course. However, please don't feel you must engage with every post - this guide contains everything you need to get going while keeping things simple.

Let's begin...

Week 1

We're starting really calmly. This week we're laying the foundations necessary to get going later this month. But there's still stuff to do! You're going to stick to your usual routine, set up your tuff spot in the way you would usually do. The only difference is that you, and your team, are going to be looking through a slightly different lens.

What to look for

Try to find small windows of time, even just five minutes, to observe the tray in action. Keep these three "D's" in mind:

- **Duration:** How long are children actually staying at the tray? Is it a "drive-by" play where they stop for less than a minute, or are they settling in for longer play?
- **Determination:** Look at their faces and bodies. Do they look focused and purposeful, or do they seem overwhelmed and a bit "flitty"?
- **Depth:** Are they using the materials in the way you intended, or are they just moving things from A to B?

Sourcing your tools

While we aren't changing the setups just yet, use your observations to think about the physical tools that could enhance the play. When selecting these, aim for familiarity. Choosing tools that children recognise from their daily lives—perhaps a ladle from the kitchen or a brush from the garden—gives them a "head start." Because they already have a basic understanding of how the tool works, they can focus their energy on the exploration of the materials rather than the mechanics of the object itself.

Your mini-task this week: Start a "wish list" of tools based on what you see. Begin sourcing these now—look in your cupboards, ask parents for donations of real kitchenware, or check the staff room for "treasures."

To help you source the right items, consider how play typically manifests at different stages and which familiar tools might bridge the gap to deeper learning:

	What the Play Looks Like	Familiar Tools to Source
Babies	Sensory & Exploratory: Play is often about the "here and now"—mouthing, grasping, and feeling weights or temperatures. They are exploring "containing" and "releasing."	The Familiar: Metal treasure baskets items, small espresso spoons, lightweight wooden bowls, or silicone whisks. Items they see during weaning or mealtimes are perfect.
Toddlers	Functional & Repetitive: You'll see a lot of "filling and emptying" and transporting. They are testing cause and effect—"What happens when I pour this?" or "How loud is this bang?"	The Familiar: Small milk jugs, tea strainers, mashers, and sturdy metal scoops. These mimic the "doing" jobs they see adults perform in the kitchen or garden.
Pre-school+	Purposeful & Narrative: Play becomes more precise and often involves a "story" or a specific problem to solve. They are developing fine motor control and can handle more complex "jobs."	The Familiar: Tongs, garlic presses, measuring spoons, pipettes, or pastry brushes. Tools that require a "grip and squeeze" action or precision allow them to "work" with the materials.

The 'Slow CPD' Reflection

At the end of the week, have a think about these questions:

Was there a setup that took a long time to "install" but was finished with by the children in minutes?

Why did we choose the setups we did this week? Was it because they were meaningful to the children, or because they "looked the part"?

What is the one tool (not a toy, but a tool) that would have made the children's play more efficient today?

Don't worry if you realise your trays aren't performing as well as you'd like. That's exactly why we're doing this! This week isn't about judgement; it's about gathering the evidence we need to make life easier in Week 2.

Now that you've spent a week observing how your tuff spot is naturally used and have sourced some familiar tools, it's time to experiment with the "stripped back" approach.

This week is about intention. By stripping the tray back to a single material and a small selection of tools, we remove the "clutter" and see if we can increase the focus and creativity of the children.

Less is more

This week, every time you prepare the tuff spot for a play session, I want you to follow these three rules:

- 1. A Single Material** - Choose just one base material for that specific session. It could be sand, rice, dried pasta, water, gloop, powder paint, or compost. You can change the material for the next session or the next day, but for the duration of that play period, keep it to just one.
- 2. The Tool Basket** - Set up a small basket or shelf near the tuff spot containing the 5–10 tools you sourced last week.
- 3. No "Installation"** - Resist the urge to set a specific scene or learning objective. Leave the tray open for the children to decide how the material and tools interact.

What to look for

The "tool" concept changes as children develop. Here is how to adapt this week's setup to ensure it's developmentally appropriate:

	The "Stripped Back" Setup	What "Tools" Mean Here	Familiar Tools (Sourced in Wk1)
Babies	Focus on a sensory-rich material safe for mouthing (e.g., plain water, yoghurt, or a very thin layer of oats).	For babies, a "tool" is a sensory extension. They are "tooling" the material to explore weight, sound, and touch.	Metal treasure basket items, small espresso spoons, lightweight wooden bowls, or silicone whisks.
Toddlers	Focus on a material that is transformable (e.g., dry pasta, compost, or "gloop").	Tools are for functional movement. They are testing what the material does when they move, mash, or pour it.	Small milk jugs, tea strainers, mashers, and sturdy metal scoops.
Pre-school+	Focus on a material that allows for precision or construction (e.g., damp sand, clay, or wet soil).	Tools are for refinement and purpose. They use them to "work" the material to achieve a specific goal or story.	Tongs, garlic presses, measuring spoons, pipettes, or pastry brushes.

Secondary task (preparing for Week 3)

As you watch the play this week, start a conversation with your team about textures.

- Which materials did the children settle into most quickly?
- Were there "familiar" textures (like water or sand) that sparked more complex talk than "novelty" materials?
- **The Task:** Note down the most "well-loved" textures. We will use these in Week 3 to begin building a more complex learning journey.

To prepare for week 3 I want you to source 5-10 materials that your children either know well or are SIMILAR. For example they may know cornflour very well, but you choose custard powder because it's similar and there's a slightly different element here to bring in new learning. This collection of resources becomes your 'pantry.' Once sourced put it into a cupboard and prepare for week 3.

The 'Slow CPD' Reflection

Take a moment at the end of a session to consider:

How did it feel to stop yourself from adding "just one more thing" to the tray?

Did you feel a sense of pressure to make it look "busier"?

Compare this week to your observations in Week 1. Did the children stay for longer with fewer items, or did they move on faster?

How did the children respond to the "real" tools compared to the usual plastic resources? Did the weight, texture, or "grown-up" nature of the tools change how they handled them?

A Note on Pressure: If you have a day where you feel the need to go back to your old way of setting up, that's absolutely fine. This challenge is a process of discovery, not a set of rigid rules. The "slow" in Slow CPD means giving yourself the grace to experiment without the fear of getting it "wrong."

The role of the adult

In Week 3, your role shifts from being the "setter-upper" to being a Responsive Practitioner. You aren't there to dictate the play or show the children "the right way" to mix (You can support and model), but ideally you're there to observe and respond.

Because we have kept the tools exactly the same (that trusty basket of 5–10 items), your mental energy is freed up to watch how the children's curiosity evolves as the materials collide. Your goal is to be "tuned in" enough to know which of your materials will provide the perfect "level up" for the next session.

But knowing what material to add isn't always straight forward. It's made partially harder because I restricted you to only buying a few for your new pantry. the key is to be responsive to what the children appear to be interested/fascinated in.

If you notice...	...Then try adding:	Because:
Children are frustrated that a material is too powdery or dry.	Water or Hair Gel	It introduces viscosity. It "binds" the dry materials and changes the physical effort needed to stir.
Children are focused on the "crunch" and the sounds of the tray.	Cornflakes or Weetabix	It leans into auditory feedback. These materials provide a satisfying "snap" that contrasts with silent powders.
Children are trying to "hide" things or find smaller spaces.	Penne Pasta	It introduces containment. It provides a "vessel" for the finer grains (custard/oats) to be posted into.
Children are slowing down and exploring soft, silkier textures.	Custard Powder or Oats	It rewards fine-motor touch. These materials are "calming" and encourage slower, more rhythmic manipulation.

The 'Slow CPD' Reflection

This week's reflection is about the mental shift in your teaching practice. Take five minutes with your team (or your notebook) to consider:

1. How often did you feel the urge to "show" them how to mix the materials? Did you manage to step back and let the discovery happen naturally?
2. How did it feel to choose Tuesday's material based on Monday's play, rather than a pre-planned theme? Did it make the planning feel more "alive"?
3. Think about that one tool (like the potato masher). What was the most surprising thing a child did with it when the material changed?

A Note on "Mess": As the textures collide, the tray will get messy. In "Slow CPD," we view this mess as visible evidence of learning. Don't rush to tidy it mid-session; the "sludge" created by mixing custard powder and water is where the most complex state-change conversations happen!

Still with me? I'm incredibly impressed! This isn't easy. For many of you, I am asking you to work in a totally different way, and being pushed out of your comfort zone like that is challenging—but well done for sticking with it.

Now, we cap off the challenge by taking the locks off the tool cupboard and the pantry. This week, you have the freedom to introduce any tool and any material to the tuff spot—but there is one golden rule: Every addition must be justified.

How to justify

An "enhancement" isn't just about making the tray look better; it's about responding to a specific spark of curiosity. Before you add a new item, you must be able to justify it based on:

- **What you saw:** "I noticed Sarah trying to squeeze the hair gel through her fingers."
- **What you heard:** "Tom said the custard powder looked like 'dusty clouds'."
- **The Intent:** "I am adding a sieve to see if it supports Tom's interest in how the powder falls."

Your new set up

- **Monday (The Baseline):** Start the week with a single, familiar base material and your original basket of 5–10 tools.
- **The Evolution:** From Tuesday onwards, follow the process from Week 3 of adding new materials, but you are now also empowered to dip into your tool cupboard.
- **The Pace:** Only change or add one small thing at a time (either a material or a tool). This ensures you can see the direct impact of your choice.

	The Observation	The Justified "Move"	The Learning Intent
Babies	Notice a baby trying to "pat" the water to make a splash.	Add a large sponge or a flat whisk.	To provide a tool that creates a different sensory "feedback" when patted.
Toddlers	Notice a child trying to "poke" holes in the hair gel with their finger.	Add a honey dipper or a chunky chopstick.	To move the play from general palmar grasp to pincer-grip precision.
Pre-school+	Notice children trying to "transport" materials from the tray to another area.	Add funnels and clear tubing.	To explore the concept of flow and trajectories in a more complex way.

Why 'one small thing'?

Children learn by forming connections between what they know and what is new. When we change the material and the tools and the people they play with, that's a lot of new things to cope with. So keeping as many of the things the same as possible whilst changing only a single thing allows them to focus all their effort on learning about that one new thing. We often overlook this in Early Years. Ironically when we follow this approach children make much faster progress than when we change everything!

The 'Slow CPD' Reflection

As we close this January Challenge, take a longer moment with your team to look at the "Big Picture":

- Do you feel more confident explaining why a specific tool is on your tray to a colleague, a parent, or an inspector?
- Do you feel that your 5-minute "Responsive Moves" this week were more effective than the 30-minute "Setups" you were doing in Week 1?
- Which of these "Slow CPD" habits will you keep?

Closing Thought: You've shifted from being an "Installer" to a "Facilitator." You are no longer just setting a stage; you are co-constructing a learning journey with the children. That is Purposeful Provision!