

Principles for early years education

These principles are drawn from, and are evident in, good and effective practice in early years settings.

Effective education requires both a relevant curriculum and practitioners who understand and are able to implement the curriculum requirements.

Effective education requires practitioners who understand that children develop rapidly during the early years – physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially. Children are entitled to provision that supports and extends knowledge, skills, understanding and confidence, and helps them to overcome any disadvantage.

Practitioners should ensure that all children feel included, secure and valued. They must build positive relationships with parents in order to work effectively with them and their children.

Early years experience should build on what children already know and can do. It should also encourage a positive attitude and disposition to learn and aim to prevent early failure.

No child should be excluded or disadvantaged because of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, special educational needs, disability, gender or ability.

Parents and practitioners should work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect within which children can have security and confidence.

To be effective, an early years curriculum should be carefully structured. In that structure, there should be three strands:

- provision for the different starting points from which children develop their learning, building on what they can already do;
- relevant and appropriate content that matches the different levels of young children's needs;
- planned and purposeful activity that provides opportunities for teaching and learning, both indoors and outdoors.

There should be opportunities for children to engage in activities planned by adults and also those that they plan or initiate themselves. Children do not make a distinction between 'play' and 'work' and neither should practitioners. Children need time to become engrossed, work in depth and complete activities.

Practitioners must be able to observe and respond appropriately to children, informed by a knowledge of how children develop and learn and a clear understanding of possible next steps in their development and learning.

Well-planned, purposeful activity and appropriate intervention by practitioners will engage children in the learning process and help them make progress in their learning.

For children to have rich and stimulating experiences, the learning environment should be well planned and well organised. It provides the structure for teaching within which children explore, experiment, plan and make decisions for themselves, thus enabling them to learn, develop and make good progress.

Above all, effective learning and development for young children requires high-quality care and education by practitioners.

These principles are the basis on which every part of this guidance has been developed, and are reflected throughout.

Putting the principles into practice

The following section sets out the common features of good practice that will result from these principles. It also gives examples that show how they have been put into practice in a range of different settings.

These principles require practitioners to work in partnership with parents to support each individual child and ensure no child is disadvantaged or excluded. This is demonstrated when practitioners:

- manage carefully the transition between home and setting and between different settings, to support everyone involved;
- establish feelings of trust and respect with parents and children;
- treat children as individuals to ensure each has equality of opportunity;
- find out about the child's ethnic, faith and cultural heritage and home experiences, so that familiar experiences and interests can be used as starting points for learning and teaching;
- promote self-confidence and a positive attitude to learning in all children, whatever their gender, ethnicity, home language, special educational needs, disability or ability;
- recognise that being successful and feeling confident and secure are major factors in protecting children against early failure.

Practitioners should ensure that all children feel included, secure and valued.

Parents and practitioners should work together in an atmosphere of mutual respect within which children can have security and confidence.

For example, at a nursery, the children start to visit with their parents as babies or toddlers. By offering childcare and group work with and apart from children, practitioners help parents develop skills that support them and their children. They encourage parents to share their knowledge and views of their child's development and raise any concerns. The setting has a multilingual practitioner who relates with families from a range of ethnic and cultural traditions. She ensures that families know about the services available and is a link between the families, key staff and other agencies. The practitioners ensure that the displays and resources reflect children's home and community experience. Before admission at age three, a practitioner visits the family and child at home to get to know them. The family is given information in an accessible format about the way sessions are organised that outlines how different activities contribute to the curriculum. The parent is encouraged to stay with the child as part of the process of transition between home and the group wherever possible and arrangements are flexible to accommodate the needs of working parents. Throughout the family's association with the setting, the key practitioner, parent and child talk regularly to check how well they are all adjusting to the arrangements for settling in, learning and teaching. She makes sure that the family or child's particular interests and experiences, such as the birth of a new baby, are used in planning work with the child. When the child transfers to primary school, the practitioner ensures that the parent knows how to select a school and how the transition will work. She meets the parent to prepare the final record of the child's progress and attainment. She liaises with the receiving school and the family so that everyone is kept fully informed.

These principles require practitioners to understand how children develop and learn during the early years. This is demonstrated when practitioners:

- have an understanding of how children develop and learn from birth to age six;
- have a clear awareness of the knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes to learning that children need to acquire in order to achieve the early learning goals by the end of the foundation stage;
- are aware of how children learn most effectively so that they can identify the range of needs and learning styles within their group;
- are aware of those children who may require additional help and those who are more able and of how support needs to be provided;
- evaluate their practice, recognising the importance of identifying and meeting their training needs.

Effective education requires both a relevant curriculum and practitioners who understand and are able to implement the curriculum requirements.

Effective education requires practitioners who understand that children develop rapidly during the early years – physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially.

For example, as part of the training plan negotiated with and supported by the managers of their settings, a group of practitioners and parents from several types of setting meet regularly to share experiences and ideas. The group work is a valuable part of systematic training and alerts people to other training opportunities. Most have been on training courses provided by a range of early years support groups and charities and to workshops run by individual settings. Some have gained qualifications, such as an NVQ level 3 or a degree in child development and/or in teaching.

Previous meetings have focused on supporting early literacy and talking with children. The current meeting is to help practitioners and parents help children to resolve conflict. In small groups, adults with different types of training and experience list typical situations in which conflicts occur. When the lists are compared, similar situations are identified; these include taking a toy from another child, having a tantrum when asked to change an activity, sitting next to a child who does not want this, and disrupting other children's play.

Small groups discuss how to step in and what to say to help the children involved develop the skills they need to resolve their conflicts. The ideas are then shared to find the best method. The notes of the meeting help people reflect on what is reasonable at different stages of children's development and the different ways in which children learn.

These principles require practitioners to plan a learning environment, indoors and outdoors, that encourages a positive attitude to learning through rich and stimulating experiences and by ensuring each child feels included. This is demonstrated when practitioners:

- use materials, equipment and displays that reflect the community the children come from and the wider world;
- plan an environment free from stereotypical images and discriminatory practice;
- include the local community and environment as a source of learning;
- encourage children to make choices and develop independence by having equipment and materials readily available and well organised;
- provide resources that inspire children and encourage them to initiate their own learning;
- give the children the space they need for their activities.

No child should be excluded or disadvantaged because of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, special educational needs, disability, gender or ability.

For children to have rich and stimulating experiences, the learning environment should be well planned and well organised.



These principles require practitioners to plan and organise the learning environment to provide experiences that build on what children already know and to involve themselves in children's learning. This is demonstrated when practitioners:

- enable children to become involved by planning experiences which are mostly based on real life situations;
- allow time for sustained concentration;
- understand that every aspect of learning for young children – personal, social, emotional, physical and intellectual – is interrelated and interdependent and reflect this in their planning.

This principle requires practitioners to plan a carefully structured curriculum that provides rich and stimulating experiences. This is demonstrated when practitioners:

- plan experiences that are relevant, imaginative, motivating, enjoyable and challenging;
- make effective use of unexpected and unforeseen opportunities for children's learning that arise from everyday events and routines;
- make good use of outdoor space so that children are enabled to learn by working on a larger, more active scale than is possible indoors.

Early years experience should build on what children already know and can do.

Well-planned, purposeful activity and appropriate intervention by practitioners will engage children in the learning process.

For example, the practitioners in a pre-school have set up a 'hospital'. This arises in response to a child's experience of breaking an arm and bringing in her X-ray, and the children's interest in her plaster cast. Practitioners and children decide that the hospital needs a reception area with a telephone, appointment book, pencils and notepad. Children take the role of receptionist, answering calls and making appointments and relevant notes. Their 'writing' uses a number of well-known letters or approximations of letters or numbers. Children dress as nurses and doctors, attend to patients and 'write' prescriptions, which the 'patients' take away. A practitioner shows children how to use bandages. He becomes a patient so that the children can practise on him. He draws a child who is being disruptive into the play. The practitioner and children talk about taking temperatures and refer to known and big numbers. They make the connection between a high temperature and evidence that something is wrong. Although children join and leave the play, many sustain their attention for a long time. Some play a number of roles and perform many actions, while some repeat and practise the experiences important to them. A parent joins the play to support those children using a home language other than English.

The practitioners make sure that the children spend their time in worthwhile and challenging activities. Throughout the session there is a supportive routine with a mix of group and individual activities together with opportunities for children to make choices about activities. This provides the security which promotes confidence and the challenge which promotes learning.

To be effective, an early years curriculum should be carefully structured.

For example, in a childminding setting, the practitioner plans each day so that her two children and the child in her care have a range of different experiences, indoors and outdoors. She plans creative work such as cooking and painting in the kitchen while the sitting room is used for quiet activities such as stories and using puzzles and games. The practitioner's small garden is used for digging and planting, and once a week she takes the children to the local leisure centre. There they take part in physical activity in a group for children aged between two and five. On the way to the centre she encourages the children to think about what they will do on the apparatus, in the ball pit and on the trampolines. During the hour-long session the children take an energetic part in the activities. From the sidelines, the practitioner encourages their growing confidence and independence and joins in as they count the number of jumps they have done on the trampoline. From time to time they return to her side for a brief conversation about what else they might do.

At the end of the session, the three children and the practitioner talk about the activities as they have a drink and snack that she has brought along. They discuss the new child who cried and would not leave his mother and what he could have been frightened of.

On another day, the children collect fallen leaves after running through them on the way to the shops and library. Later they make a collage and find out about the leaves from a reference book.

This principle requires practitioners to observe children and respond appropriately to help them make progress. This is demonstrated when practitioners:

- make systematic observations and assessments of each child's achievements, interests and learning styles;
- use these observations and assessments to identify learning priorities and plan relevant and motivating learning experiences for each child;
- match their observations to the expectations of the early learning goals.

These principles require practitioners to provide a relevant curriculum that is carefully structured, with well-planned activities and appropriate intervention. This is demonstrated when practitioners:

- plan their time well, so that most of it is spent working directly with children;
- help to extend children's vocabulary and language;
- help children to see the purpose of activities;
- accommodate the different ways children learn by planning for the same learning objective in a range of different ways;
- help children consolidate their learning by revisiting the same learning objective many times;
- establish an ethos in which individual achievements are valued;
- plan sessions to include adult- and child-planned activities, with uninterrupted time for children to work in depth.

Practitioners must be able to observe and respond appropriately to children.

For example, in a playgroup, practitioners make detailed observations of the children. These help them to recognise patterns in children's play, how they interact with adults and each other, what they are interested in and how learning can be extended.

The notes are kept in a portfolio for each child. It is used as a basis for discussion between practitioners and with parents and children. Parents are encouraged to ask questions about what their child does in the setting. Many see links with interests at home and begin to keep a home diary which they share regularly with practitioners, who include this information in the portfolio and use it when planning activities for the child.

To be effective, an early years curriculum should be carefully structured.

There should be opportunities for children to engage in activities planned by adults and also those that they plan or initiate themselves.

Well-planned, purposeful activity and appropriate intervention by practitioners will engage children in the learning process.

For example, during the summer term, the reception class has two practitioners, who work effectively together as a team so that minimum time is spent on management and supervision and maximum time on teaching. On entry in the mornings, the children select from a range of activities while one practitioner talks to parents and completes the register and the other works with the children. Later, one adult leads the shared reading with the whole group and the other sits alongside some children who need help to sustain attention. The practitioners raise discussion points that encourage children to talk about the story during their time together in groups. In later activities such as listening games and building models, practitioners will, through conversation and commentary, help children learn new words and ways of using them for different purposes, such as to ask a question or to explain what they have done. Links are made between activities, for example after the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, a group of children work with the practitioner to write a note to warn Goldilocks that the bears are returning.

Both practitioners present activities in many ways. For example, early writing of a child's name may be practised, refined and consolidated:

- through labelling their own work;
- as part of role play;
- by using a computer in the estate agent's shop;
- through recording how a child made a carrier bag;
- by making a card for a celebration;
- by playing with magnetic alphabet letters;
- by making letters with dough.

Following these and similar activities, the adults praise the children's efforts. This teaches them that an achievement, such as persevering in order to gain a new skill, is valued.

Meeting the diverse needs of children

Practitioners need to provide relevant learning and development opportunities and set realistic and challenging expectations that meet the diverse needs of children, so that most achieve the early learning goals and some, where appropriate, go beyond them by the end of the foundation stage. Practitioners must be aware that children bring to their early learning provision different experiences, interests, skills and knowledge that affect their ability to learn. An awareness and understanding of the requirements of equal opportunities¹ that cover race, gender and disability and of the code of practice on the identification and assessment of special educational needs² is essential. Practitioners should plan to meet the needs of both boys and girls, children with special educational needs, children who are more able, children with disabilities, children from all social, cultural and religious backgrounds, children of different ethnic groups including Travellers, refugees and asylum seekers, and children from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

In order to meet children's diverse needs, and help all children make the best possible progress, practitioners should:

- plan opportunities that build on and extend children's knowledge, experiences, interests and skills and develop their self-esteem and confidence in their ability to learn;
- use a wide range of teaching strategies, based on children's learning needs;
- provide a wide range of opportunities to motivate, support and develop children and help them to be involved, concentrate and learn effectively;
- provide a safe and supportive learning environment, free from harassment, in which the contribution of all children is valued and where racial, religious, disability and gender stereotypes are challenged;

¹ *The Sex Discrimination Act 1975; The Race Relations Act 1976; The Disability Discrimination Act 1995.*

² *From September 2001, it is anticipated that the revised SEN Code of Practice will specify particular requirements for intervention in early years settings.*

- use materials that positively reflect diversity and are free from discrimination and stereotyping;
- plan challenging opportunities for children whose ability and understanding are in advance of their language and communication skills;
- monitor children's progress, identifying any areas of concern, and taking action to provide support, for example by using different approaches, additional adult help or other agencies.

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

Practitioners will need to plan for each child's individual learning requirements, including those children who need additional support or have particular needs or disabilities. The focus should be on removing barriers for children where these already exist and on preventing learning



difficulties from developing. Early years practitioners have a key role to play in working with parents to identify learning needs and respond quickly to any area of particular difficulty, and to develop an effective strategy to meet these needs, making good use of individual education plans, so that later difficulties can be avoided. Wherever possible, practitioners should work together with staff from other agencies, such as local and community health services, to provide the best learning opportunities for individual children.

Practitioners should take specific action to help children with special educational needs to make the best possible progress by:

- providing for those who need help with communication, language and literacy skills, and planning, where necessary, to develop understanding through the use of all available senses and experiences through, for example:
 - using alternative and augmentative communication, including signs and symbols;
 - using visual and written materials in different formats, including large print and symbol text, using information and communication technology (ICT), other technological aids and taped materials;
 - using materials and resources that children can access through sight, touch, sound and smell;
 - increasing children's knowledge of the wider world by using word descriptions and other stimuli to extend their experiences and imagination.
- planning for full participation in learning and in all physical and practical activity through, for example:
 - providing additional support from adults, when needed;
 - adapting activities or environments, providing alternative activities, and using specialist aids and equipment, where appropriate.
- helping children who have particular difficulties with behaviour to take part in learning effectively through, for example:

- setting reasonable expectations that have been discussed with the child and with parents and carers, establishing clear boundaries and appreciating and praising children’s efforts;
- encouraging and promoting positive behaviour, giving children every chance and encouragement to develop the skills they need to work well with another child or children;
- helping children to manage their behaviour and to value and respect their own contribution and that of others.

Children with English as an additional language

Many children in early years settings will have a home language other than English. Practitioners should value this linguistic diversity and provide opportunities for children to develop and use their home language in their play and learning. These children will be at many stages of learning English as an additional language. Some children are bilingual from birth because their families have talked to them in more than one language. Some children will be acquiring English as an additional language. As with their first language, this needs to be learnt in context, through practical, meaningful experiences and interaction with others. These children may spend a long time listening before they speak English and will often be able to understand much of what they hear, particularly where communication through gesture, sign, facial expression and using visual support such as pictures and puppets is encouraged.

Learning opportunities should be planned to help children develop their English and support provided to help them take part in other activities by, for example:

- building on children’s experiences of language at home and in the wider community by providing a range of opportunities to use their home language(s), so that their developing use of English and other languages support one another;
- providing a range of opportunities for children to engage in speaking and listening activities in English with peers and adults;
- ensuring all children have opportunities to recognise and show respect for each child’s home language;
- providing bilingual support, in particular to extend vocabulary and support children’s developing understanding;
- providing a variety of writing in the children’s home languages as well as in English, including books, notices and labels;
- providing opportunities for children to hear their home languages as well as English, for example through use of audio and video materials.



Learning and teaching

Learning for young children is a rewarding and enjoyable experience in which they explore, investigate, discover, create, practise, rehearse, repeat, revise and consolidate their developing knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes. During the foundation stage, many of these aspects of learning are brought together effectively through playing and talking.

Effective learning involves:

- Children initiating activities that promote learning and enable them to learn from each other

If there is a stimulating environment, young children's learning will be enhanced. Children should be able to use available resources to explore at their own pace. For example, in a creative workshop area children change the cars they are making into a train as they make associations between their own ideas and the way the materials are fixed together. Well-organised resources that are easily accessible encourage children to make choices and explore. This also allows practitioners to work alongside children, to value what they are doing and to interact appropriately to support development and learning, rather than simply managing resources. One child's interest can encourage other children to become involved in activities. For example, a child with speech difficulties loves music and knows all the actions to a song tape. Other children join in by watching him and following his movements.

- Children learning through movement and all their senses

Young children are active learners who use all their senses to build concepts and ideas from their experiences. For example, children listening to music may clap their hands, bounce up and down or sway to its rhythm; children looking at 'larger' and 'smaller' clothes may try them on; a child who is visually impaired may stroke and feel a guinea pig to find out what it looks like.

- Children having time to explore ideas and interests in depth

The process of learning, as well as the content or outcomes, is important for young children. They need time to explore if they are to be satisfied with a piece of learning. Sometimes this may mean that the practitioner needs to be flexible in what they had planned for the session. Sometimes it may mean finding ways for children to return to activities at a later time. For example, a child climbing in the garden sees a spider. She recalls seeing a book about spiders and goes indoors to find it. She shows a friend the picture and then takes him outdoors to find the real spider, which is now spinning a web. The two children return indoors to the painting easel and paint spiders. They become interested in making web patterns with many different coloured lines. Finally, they cover their paintings with a single colour and use their fingers to 'draw' spiders in the wet paint. This whole process has taken some 40 minutes of concentrated, focused and sustained activity, which the children describe in detail to their group and key practitioner at the end of the session.

- Children feeling secure, which helps them to become confident learners

The significant adults to whom children relate during the foundation stage expand from the family to include the practitioners in early years settings. Children, their parents and practitioners need to develop positive relationships based on trust. Young children often want immediate answers to their questions and grow in confidence when they receive relevant attention during activities. The parallel growth of confidence and trust enables children to take risks in their learning, to try to solve problems and to view practitioners as helpful teachers.

- Children learning in different ways and at different rates

Practitioners need to understand that children learn the same thing in different ways and that progression in their learning happens at different times and at different rates. At an early stage, children may show their involvement through facial expression, for example wonder at a snowstorm, or through stance, for example crouching to peer at an insect. They may spend considerable time examining objects or books on display or be engaged in repeating experiences or in play. Some will learn more readily outdoors or through music and dance. As they grow older, children may record what they have experienced in drawings, paintings, models or writing.

- Children making links in their learning

Certain ideas captivate many children and steer their learning. Observations of children show that what appears to be random play can often be linked to the development of concepts such as position, connection or order. For example, a child constantly assembling wooden blocks gives the practitioner an insight into that child's learning, so that activities can be planned that will help develop the child's understanding of ideas such as shape, space and number.

- Creative and imaginative play activities that promote the development and use of language

Children engaged in 'small world' play and role play of various types will enact scenarios for long periods using the 'scripts' they know from home or television experience, for example going to the shops or the doctor or surviving as a dinosaur. Children are quick to learn and use relevant new vocabulary however difficult it seems to adults. Children like, but are also still at the stage of being frightened by, acting out some experiences, for example the implied danger from stories such as *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Anansi*, and the practitioner needs to be sensitive to this. In order to include all children, practitioners should plan for the specific needs of children whose first language is not English or who sign or use other forms of communication by, for example, playing alongside them to help them join in or by ensuring other children in the group have learnt to sign.

Teaching means systematically helping children to learn so that they are helped to make connections in their learning and are actively led forward, as well as helped to reflect on what they have already learnt. Teaching has many aspects, including planning and creating a learning environment, organising time and material resources, interacting, questioning, responding to questions, working with and observing children, assessing and recording children's progress and sharing knowledge gained with other practitioners and parents. The quality of each of these aspects of teaching is informed by the practitioners' knowledge and understanding of what is to be taught and how young children learn. Practitioners teach children in many ways. The different ways to teach may be selected at the planning stage or may be a perceptive response to what children do or say. Although teaching can be defined simply, it is a complex process. Young children do not come into a setting in a neat package of social, emotional, physical and intellectual development. During the foundation stage, physical and social development will vary enormously from child to child. The strategies used in learning and teaching should vary and should be adapted to suit the needs of the child.

Effective teaching requires:

- Working in partnership with parents, because parents continue to have a prime teaching role with their children

For example, while washing up, parents and children talk about the size of the bubbles and what the utensils have been used for, or on a bus or car journey the family talk about the journey and where they are going. In a positive relationship, parents and practitioners will be able to talk about children's responses to activities and experiences in the family and in the setting. Children should be encouraged to take home books to share with their parents and bring objects from home that are relevant to what they are doing in the setting, such as a photograph of themselves as babies for a discussion about themselves.

- Promoting children's learning through planned experiences and activities that are challenging but achievable

Children feel secure when they take part in activities that interest them, for example role play or stories. The practitioner can help children build on prior learning by pitching the play or story at a level that is demanding but still within the child's reach.

- Practitioners who model a range of positive behaviour

For example, practitioners can model being a learner as they work with children. Practitioners' behaviour towards each other and with parents should be a model for courtesy and respect. Practitioners model active listening when they listen attentively to children, when they support a child who is being called names or harassed, when they show they are willing to take turns in the conversation and when they show respect for what the child has to say. Practitioners teach social and emotional skills when they help children care for resources and show them how to negotiate over the use of equipment.

- Using language that is rich and using correct grammar. Recognising that what is said and how the practitioner speaks is the main way of teaching new vocabulary and helping children to develop linguistic structures for thinking

A major role in teaching involves extending children's language sensitively, while acknowledging and showing respect for home language, local dialect and any forms of augmentative communication that children may be using. Practitioners teach children key words by using them in response to a child's 'have-a-go' words rather than by telling children they are wrong. In this non-judgemental and unthreatening way they help children develop speech using appropriate words and speech patterns. In settings where children have a home language other than English, or sign or use symbols to communicate, the use of these by practitioners and other children can significantly enhance communication for everyone.

- Using conversation and carefully framed questions because this is crucial in developing children's knowledge

Conversation, open-ended questions and thinking out loud are important tools in developing vocabulary and in challenging thinking. Practitioners can use discussion times well by demonstrating questions such as 'How can we ...?', 'Can you find a way to ...?', 'How does this work?' and 'What other words can we use?' Encouraging children to reflect on and tell others what they have been doing, 'I wonder if ...?', helps them to give voice to what they know and to practise thinking and new vocabulary.

- Direct teaching of skills and knowledge

Practitioners who know the children they teach are able to judge when they are ready to be taught skills such as using scissors and staplers safely. For example, sensitivity is needed in judging when a child has sufficient hand-eye coordination and confidence to be taught how to hold and use correctly such tools as a magnifier or a pencil.

- Children teaching each other

More experienced children in the setting can help those who are less experienced by showing them where to find resources and demonstrating and talking to them about, for example, where to begin when reading a book, what will happen next within the routine or how to negotiate for a turn on the computer. They will practise their own skills and language and become more secure in their knowledge and understanding as they show and explain what they have done to other children.

- Interacting with and supporting children in a way that positively affects the attitudes to learning that children develop

Practitioners' values and beliefs will affect their teaching and how children learn. Motivating children to concentrate, to persevere and to try several ways to make something work rather than giving up requires practitioners to use encouraging, friendly, optimistic and lively approaches to support children. Enabling children to learn should be based on knowing what children can do, identifying what comes next and knowing when it is timely to intervene and when to hold back.

- Planning the indoor and outdoor environment carefully to provide a positive context for learning and teaching

Children can be helped to develop independence, self-control and self-reliance if practitioners plan the environment carefully by making full use of available space, indoors and outdoors. High-quality resources, including recycled items, should be made accessible in an attractive and stimulating way for all children, for example by placing the sand tray on the floor for children who are unable to stand. Having routines and a rhythm to the day helps children to gain confidence and independence. For example, by knowing that there will be time to come back to activities, children can choose to join a group who are going to cook or listen to a story.

- Skilful and well-planned observations of children

Information about what children have done and said can be gathered through observations of children that are sometimes recorded by the practitioner, for example in writing, photographs or on video or audio tape. Talking to children, assessing outcomes such as models, paintings, designs, drawings or ‘writing’, and observing them individually and in groups in different activities give an insight into what children know, understand and can do, and where they need support. Logging children’s use of a particular activity or a play scenario helps practitioners monitor how children use their time, their particular interests and any gaps in their experiences, so that practitioners can plan a balanced curriculum that takes note of children’s strengths, interests and needs.

- Assessing children’s development and progress to serve several purposes. Assessment opportunities may be identified in planning or arise spontaneously

Assessment gives insight into children’s interests, achievements and possible difficulties in their learning from which next steps in learning and teaching can be planned. It also helps ensure early identification of special educational needs and particular abilities.

- Working with parents, who are vital partners in the assessment and planning process

Practitioners should share with and receive from parents information about children’s achievements and targets. Parents have important information that supports practitioners’ planning for, and work with, children. Such information may include children’s competence in their language at home, whether or not it is English, their ability to be imaginative and inventive outside the setting and their competence in using technology at home. This sharing of information between the setting and the home helps to ensure that appropriate targets are set for children and that both practitioners and parents know about them and can continue to work together to teach and support their children.

- Identifying the next step in children’s learning to plan how to help children make progress

Practitioners need to share information gained from assessment to:

- inform their future planning;
- group children for particular activities and interests;
- ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of all children;
- promote continuity and progression.

Where practitioners are clear about what children know, the skills they have developed, the attitudes they have towards learning and the interests they have, they can plan how best to take the learning and teaching forward.

- Using assessment to evaluate the quality of provision and practitioners training needs

Practitioners can identify areas for improvement in terms of organisation, management, extending resources or training to improve provision and their own knowledge, skills and understanding and the effectiveness of their teaching.

Play

Well-planned play, both indoors and outdoors, is a key way in which young children learn with enjoyment and challenge. In playing, they behave in different ways: sometimes their play will be boisterous, sometimes they will describe and discuss what they are doing, sometimes they will be quiet and reflective as they play.

The role of the practitioner is crucial in:

- planning and resourcing a challenging environment;
- supporting children's learning through planned play activity;
- extending and supporting children's spontaneous play;
- extending and developing children's language and communication in their play.

Through play, in a secure environment with effective adult support, children can:

- explore, develop and represent learning experiences that help them make sense of the world;
- practise and build up ideas, concepts and skills;
- learn how to control impulses and understand the need for rules;
- be alone, be alongside others or cooperate as they talk or rehearse their feelings;
- take risks and make mistakes;
- think creatively and imaginatively;
- communicate with others as they investigate or solve problems;
- express fears or relive anxious experiences in controlled and safe situations.

