

While the extension of early learning and care to some two year olds is welcomed this policy change requires more than simple calculations about numbers of children, space and adults. Two year olds, especially those who may have experienced disadvantages and the kind of temporary or chronic experiences that can limit development, have particular needs and thrive when given certain opportunities. They are ready to explore, are beginning to enjoy pretend play and are talking more – but generally they do not yet have the confidence and competences of a three year old when it comes to being imaginative, playing with others, knowing what they like and seeking it out, listening and responding or being independent in a social setting. Furthermore, not all two year olds are alike and there is no neat match between chronological age and development. Some three year olds may need the kind of provision typically offered to two year olds. Some two year olds may be keen explorers but seldom use talk to communicate, and others may talk but struggle to engage with other children or may even resist relationships with adults.

We are glad to have this opportunity to draw attention to the particular needs of two year olds (or other children whose development can most appropriately be categorised as being like a two year old) in group education and care settings, whether that is with a childminder, nursery or other early learning or childcare setting in the public, private or voluntary sector. To develop the list below we have drawn on the current consensus among practitioners, trainers and experienced managers and providers about practice that fosters the development of two year olds. In addition, we have consulted research literature and published practice guidance.¹

Our recommendations include aspects of experience in early learning and childcare settings that will support the learning and development of children older and younger than those we are concerned with here. However, in these recommendations we are keen to point to the ways in which general guidance for provision must be tailored to and acted upon in the context of the requirements of two year olds and their particular needs for sensitive and responsive practitioners, specially designed spaces and rich and appropriate resources.

Two year olds:

- Are skilful learners but are still dependent on the support of responsive adults
- Thrive in social environments that are appropriate in scale, offering opportunities to play and learn with others without being overwhelmed
- Need to sleep when they are ready and need variations in the pace of the day and the spaces which they occupy
- Depend on warm, affectionate and stable relationships
- Respond to regular routines and social groupings, including time with children of different ages
- Need help to understand and manage their emotions
- Can struggle to let others know how they feel and what they want to do or explore and to appreciate what others want
- Need adults to talk to them as well as listen to them
- Respond to praise, encouragement and leadership from adults and often older children
- Are keen to develop their physical skills and explore their environment, inside and outside
- Enjoy pretend play with familiar domestic objects
- Are beginning to understand symbolic representation
- Are keen to explore objects, materials, digital resources, ideas and feelings

¹ An indicative list of sources is given in Appendix 1.

- Develop in a web of relationships with family, friends and places
- Need time in nurturing settings and relationships when experiencing disadvantage or challenging home environments

Two year olds need *practitioners* who:

- have been trained specifically to work with children from birth to three, are able to lead learning and draw on an appropriate repertoire of pedagogic actions and interactions
- know how to help the child feel secure and are sensitive and responsive to differences in temperament
- engage in warm and nurturing relationships, offer praise and support the development of positive behaviour
- are aware of each child's emotional states, can find ways of comforting and calming individuals and are well tuned to their verbal and non-verbal communications
- know how each child feels in different environments e.g. noisy spaces, big groups
- are sensitive to how children feel about themselves, encourage participation and can identify what each child is ready to learn or develop next
- know about children's relationships with others, the places where they stay or visit, bring this knowledge into the child's experience in the setting and know how to engage parents meaningfully in their child's learning
- know how to establish and promote a nurturing ethos and environment where they promote and model positive interactions
- can help parents to recognise, understand and value learning experiences which they can share with their child through an enriched home learning environment

Two year olds need *practices* that:

- allow them to be individuals, meeting their need for sensitive, individual attention and play opportunities
- offer supported opportunities for friendships to develop in small groups and with children of different ages
- allow them to become familiar with routines, opportunities to experience and understand their place in different groupings, including time with children of different ages, but which are flexible enough to respond to children's behaviours and preferences
- ensure interactions with practitioners who offer stories and rhymes, respond to and enrich children's narratives and imaginative productions, talk about the children's lives and families
- opportunities to share pride in what they are doing with an attentive and responsive adult and the experience of positive and affirming interactions with adults
- ensure children and families benefit from consistent interactions with a key worker
- provide opportunities for the development of early literacy and numeracy through experiences such as mark-making, drawing, storytelling, talking and listening, counting, matching, sorting
- stimulate pretence, role play and exploration
- introduce new ideas through activities, story-telling and conversations about feelings and other social and physical worlds.
- ensure time and space to explore without interruption until they are satisfied

Two year olds need *spaces and resources* that:

- ensure uncluttered space to walk, run, climb and jump
- provide opportunities for extensive outside play and opportunities to explore environments indoors and outside that offer contrasting sensory and physical experiences
- provide space to sleep in comfort and security and which is available throughout their time in the setting
- provide objects to touch, carry, push and pull and find out how to operate
- offer plentiful role play resources and a richly resourced imaginative play area with familiar objects
- provide a regular supply of novel and familiar structured and unstructured materials and media for construction and creative activities

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Appendix 1**Sources: Early Learning and Care for Two Year Olds**

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