

Pre-Birth to Three

Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families

National Guidance



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Ministerial Foreword



‘A renewed emphasis on the period between early pregnancy and 3 years old is needed to reflect the evidence that this is the period with the greatest bearing on outcomes and a critical period in terms of breaking cycles of poor outcomes.’

(The Early Years Framework, p16)

Recognising that all adults working with Scotland’s youngest children have an important responsibility to implement *The Early Years Framework* is central to achieving transformational change for Scotland’s children.

We are increasingly aware of the impact and importance our work has now and indeed for the rest of children’s lives. In order for staff to be certain that they are providing world-class experiences for babies and children, they need to know why it is essential that they get it right for every child in these most critical years. By using the *Getting it right for every child* approach, which streamlines services and has been shown to reduce bureaucracy, we can deliver better outcomes for our children and their parents. I want to ensure that the entire workforce is supported and skilled to lead this challenging agenda.

Through prevention and early intervention, we can provide children with the social and emotional support needed to help fulfil their potential and break the cycles of underachievement which often blight some of our most disadvantaged communities. No child’s future should be predetermined by being born into disadvantaged circumstances and I firmly believe that every child should have the chance to succeed, regardless of their background. Intervening earlier with families cannot only prevent children from falling into a cycle of deprivation, antisocial behaviour and poverty, but can save thousands of pounds now and in the longer term.

This national guidance, *Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland’s Children and Families*, replaces *Birth to Three: Supporting our Youngest Children* and was revised by Learning and Teaching Scotland in collaboration with key partners, to support and inform practice across Scotland. The guidance sets out to facilitate students and staff working with and on behalf of our youngest children and their families.

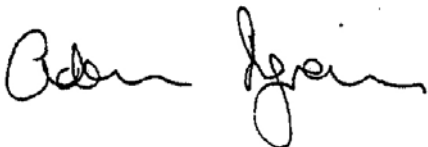
The guidance and accompanying multimedia resource includes important information on pre-birth and brain development and reflects the principles and philosophy of early intervention which underpin *The Early Years Framework*, *Achieving our Potential* and

Equally Well. It reflects the complex and multi-faceted nature of the challenges faced by some of our children and families, making clear that these challenges cannot be dealt with by a single agency, but require multi-agency collaborations. This, of course, is precisely what our three interconnected and mutually reinforcing social frameworks are intended to secure.

Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families identifies the four Key Principles of Rights of the Child, Relationships, Responsive Care and Respect. It aims to improve and enhance evidence-based practice by building on our knowledge of current research and our work with babies, young children and their families.

It highlights practical case studies and gives signposts to related research examples to support staff in their initial and continuing professional development. It also lays a sound foundation for children's learning and development and will ensure a smooth and coherent transition for all children as they begin to engage with *Curriculum for Excellence 3–18*.

I commend this important document and supporting multimedia resource to all those working with Scotland's youngest children as we realise our radical vision to prevent intergenerational poverty and break the cycle of deprivation, thus achieving the best possible start and improved life chances for ALL of our children.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adam Ingram', written in a cursive style.

Adam Ingram
Minister for Children and Early Years

Introduction

There is a strong relationship between early life experiences and how babies develop cognitively, socially, emotionally and physically throughout their lives. *The Early Years Framework* states that:

‘It is during our very earliest years and even pre-birth that a large part of the pattern for our future adult life is set.’

(Scottish Government, 2008d, p 1)

This national guidance, *Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland’s Children and Families*, replaces *Birth to Three: supporting our youngest children*. It is built on research and seeks to promote evidence-based approaches. *Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland’s Children and Families* recognises the importance of pregnancy and the first years of life in influencing children’s development and future outcomes. A focus on this period is therefore critical to achieving positive outcomes for Scotland’s children and families. Staff working with babies and families understand that learning takes place initially within the womb. They also appreciate that babies arrive into the world with their individual personalities, ready to adapt to, and be influenced by, their environment.

This national guidance sets the context for high quality care and education and seeks to identify key features that support and promote evidence-based approaches. Throughout this guidance, the following terms are used:

- **parents** to include all main caregivers
- **staff** to include those working with children and families in early years settings
- **adults** to include parents and all those working with (or on behalf of) children.





Staff working with Scotland's youngest children should recognise the impact and importance of their work on children's lives and future life chances. In order for staff to be confident that they are providing the best experiences for babies and children, they need to know why it is essential that they get it right for every child in these most critical years.

In broad terms, the purpose of this guidance is to help inform and support all adults who work with and on behalf of Scotland's youngest children. Along with the related DVD and CD, it should be regarded as a multimedia key resource which provides guidance and also stimulates and generates professional discussion and debate. This kind of approach to professional development leads to the highest quality provision for all babies and children in their very earliest years. To maximise accessibility for all, this guidance and related support materials are available online¹.

The main aim of *Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families* is to promote continuing professional development. It will also:

- facilitate effective partnership working for the benefit of every child
- build confidence, capability and capacity across the current workforce
- inform students engaged in pre-service training programmes
- provide a common reference source to promote reflection, debate and discussion
- share and inform ways in which staff support children and families
- improve and enhance evidence-informed practice.

¹ www.LTScotland.org.uk/earlyyears/index.asp

Many countries are looking with a renewed focus at the area of pre-birth to 3 years because of a growing recognition of the importance of the earliest months and years. Drawing upon national and international research, this guidance sets out four key principles for best starts and positive outcomes, through which effective support and learning opportunities for very young children can be promoted. The four key principles are:

- Rights of the Child
- Relationships
- Responsive Care
- Respect.

Based on these key principles, the guidance proposes sensitive and respectful approaches and ways of interacting that are beneficial to children and families. Nine features have been identified to put the key principles into practice. All of the key principles and features of practice are interrelated and interdependent. How they are used to inform practice is a question for staff, children and families.

Throughout this guidance, there is recognition of the various and complementary ways in which very young children are cared for in different settings. It is based on the fundamental understanding that relationships, environment, health, family and community all influence and shape children's development. Whilst children's early experiences play an important part in shaping their future attitudes and dispositions, very young children are capable individuals in their own right, and, with appropriate support, can develop resilience to deal with many of life's challenges.



A Shared Vision

This guidance reflects and supports Scotland's shared vision and commitment to developing a strategic approach to prevention and early intervention in tackling the significant inequalities in Scottish society. These priorities are set out in the Scottish Government's interrelated policy frameworks entitled *The Early Years Framework* (2008d), *Equally Well* (2008c) and *Achieving Our Potential* (2008b), all of which aim to build the capacity of individuals, families and communities so that they can secure the best outcomes for themselves. There is a strong recognition that staff across agencies must work in partnership to move from intervening only when a crisis happens, towards prevention. Providing the right support at the right time can help to build resilience, enabling individuals and families to find their own solutions to problems as they arise.

The Early Years Framework highlights the importance of prevention and early intervention:

'The period between pregnancy and 3 years is increasingly seen as a critical period in shaping children's life chances, based on evidence of brain formation, communication and language development, and the impact of relationships formed during this period on mental health. It is therefore also a critical opportunity to intervene and break cycles of poor outcomes.'

(Scottish Government, 2008d, p 8)



Recognising that all adults working with children have an important role in implementing *The Early Years Framework* is central to achieving the key aim of the framework, which is to bring about transformational change for Scotland's children. It is also essential for staff to be aware of the significant impact early experiences and life circumstances can have on future outcomes if they are to adopt a genuinely inclusive approach in the delivery of high quality provision for Scotland's youngest children. Awareness of the significance of children's life circumstances, for example their socio-economic status, race, gender, disability, religion, or whether they are looked after, is vital in helping staff to get it right for every child.

Children may have additional needs which require long-term support, whilst others may have shorter-term needs. How these needs impact on an individual child's development and learning varies from child to child and this determines the level and nature of support required. Whilst there are many individual differences and variables in respect of needs and support, prevention and early intervention are essential if children are to be provided with the very best start in life.

Staff can increase capacity to secure improved outcomes for children by:

- agreeing and adopting a shared vision, values and principles across services
- engaging in regular and appropriate high quality professional development opportunities
- recognising different needs and embracing Scotland's rich cultural diversity
- creating environments which are culturally sensitive, accessible and inclusive
- building solutions around children and families
- working together with parents and professionals to make a positive difference.



Getting it right for every child

It is the responsibility of every citizen in Scotland to support children to thrive so that they grow up as healthily and happily as possible. All work with and for children should be underpinned by the core components, values and principles of *Getting it right for every child* (Scottish Government, 2008). This national approach (often referred to as *Getting it right*) supports staff working with children in Scotland to improve their wellbeing and life chances.²

Getting it right is the methodology which should be used to implement the three policy frameworks referred to earlier in this section. These frameworks support agencies as they strive to work together to ensure the best outcomes for every child, whatever their background or individual needs. *Getting it right* and the policy frameworks also support adults working with children to take forward the values, purposes and principles of *Curriculum for Excellence 3–18*.

The *Getting it right* approach is about service providers working meaningfully with parents, adopting flexible approaches to fit individual circumstances and appreciating that everyone involved with children and families has an important contribution to make, particularly the children and families themselves.

Getting it right is founded on 10 core components, which can be used by all those working with babies and children as they play their part in making sure that Scotland's children are healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible, included and, above all, safe. These are the eight *Well-being Indicators*, which are used during the assessment and planning process, and are illustrated in the wellbeing wheel below. The *Well-being Indicators* are the basic requirements for all children and young people to grow, develop and reach their full potential.

Getting it right wellbeing wheel

The wellbeing of children and young people and their 'well-becoming' in the future are at the heart of *Getting it right*.



² See section on Partnership Working

The Importance of the Early Years

Babies are born with a predisposition for learning. They are naturally curious about the world around them and especially the people who engage with them. Whilst babies are eager to learn and make sense of the world, they require positive and consistent relationships to support them in this journey. Babies are 'programmed' to look to other people to help them make sense of their world.³



Brain Development: Making and Shaping Connections

As a result of advances in technology and neuroscience more is known about the brain now than ever before. It is known that every baby is born with a unique personality and an adaptable brain, which has a high degree of plasticity, and which is ready to be shaped by relationships and experiences (Balbernie, 2001).

It is estimated that, at birth, a baby's brain contains thousands of millions of brain cells and some of these are already connected and communicating. Babies start to learn in the womb, particularly in the last trimester. They are born able to recognise familiar sounds and they have already developed some taste preferences. Research has also shown that external influences such as the mother's emotional experiences during pregnancy can affect the development of the baby's brain (O'Donnell, O'Connor and Glover, 2009).

Forming and reinforcing connections are the key tasks of early brain development. It is the early experiences and developing relationships that cause the connections in the brain to increase rapidly. By the end of the first year, with appropriate care and support, babies vastly overgrow the number of connections they actually need. This is to enable them to test billions of different connections or 'neural pathways' for every action they take. Particular experiences determine which permanent connections are made in the brain and which are no longer needed. In this way, an important process of elimination begins towards the end of the first year as the baby's brain starts to prune itself, thus creating the most efficient structure to suit the environment and culture.

This brain development takes place through interactions with others, being active and involved, and learning through exploration and discovery. As babies and young children revisit and practise skills and language, they return to previous connections or pathways in the brain. Every time the pathway is revisited, it is strengthened and the link speeds up. Kotulak (1997) suggests that the principle 'if you don't use it, you lose it' is as true for cognitive skills as it is for muscles. The result is that the strongest pathways survive, whilst those carrying no signal wither and die.

³ See section on Attachments



This process is commonly known as ‘hard-wiring’ and 90% of the hard-wired connections will be complete by the age of 3. This process is fundamental to the critical importance of the early years as it explains and illustrates the long-lasting impact of early experiences.

Every Child Deserves the Best Start

Babies are born ready to adapt and create connections to suit the environment they meet. This ability also makes humans vulnerable when placed in less positive circumstances, where the negative impact may last a lifetime.

As children grow into mature adults, they may face challenges such as unexpected transitions or sudden changes in life circumstances. These challenges provide children with the opportunity to learn how to regulate emotions effectively, manage stress and develop the social, behavioural, and cognitive skills needed to overcome obstacles. Whilst some experience of manageable stress is important for healthy development, research shows that high levels of prolonged parental stress, trauma and neglect can impact negatively on babies and young children in respect of brain development (Talge, Neal and Glover, 2007).

High levels of stress can actually weaken the connections in the brain or can cause brain cells to die. Babies need consistent relationships, firstly to create the necessary pathways in the brain, and then to ensure that these connections become hard-wired. Babies and young children who have positive emotional bonds with adults produce consistently lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol. It is therefore important that staff recognise the potentially powerful impact that their practice can have in supporting children so that they can go on to develop positive and healthy relationships throughout life.

It is essential that staff working in early years settings recognise the need for all service providers to work together with families in order to get it right for every child. All adults working with Scotland’s youngest children must demonstrate, through their practice, their awareness that every child has the right to a positive start in life through respectful relationships which show responsive care. In this way, Scotland’s youngest children can be nurtured to develop a capacity for love, empathy, respect, resilience, positive relationships and the chance to succeed.⁴

⁴ See section on Role of Staff

Using Research to Inform Practice

Throughout this guidance, there is a clear focus on evidence-based practice. This section suggests ways in which staff can make the best possible use of research in their everyday practice. The word 'research' is often considered to belong mainly to the world of academia, but it is simply another term for 'finding out' so that informed decisions are made.

The Early Years Framework (Scottish Government, 2008d), which focuses on giving all children the best start in life, points to the importance of staff using research and other evidence to ensure that work with families is rooted in robust rationales, and not simply in habit and hearsay:

'We need to capture what the evidence tells us about the nature of effective practice, learn from innovative approaches in Scotland and elsewhere and develop a culture of learning within the workforce so that they can apply the evolving culture of learning for the benefit of children and families.'

(2008d, p 23)

Making informed decisions relating to practice is more likely to have a positive impact for children and families, and it may be that staff could work more effectively to strengthen the bridge between research and practice.



In order to improve and promote evidence-based practice, staff could:

- engage regularly in continuing professional development activity
- articulate and communicate the questions that need to be explored to improve the quality of provision for children and families
- share findings around what works in practice, by making use of Learning and Teaching Scotland website, Glow and other websites
- subscribe to new e-bulletins, publications or websites
- reflect on different aspects of practice with colleagues, children and parents and focus on what is done and why
- encourage children to adopt a ‘finding-out’ culture so that research is regarded as a natural tool.



Most staff would agree that being able to explain their practice by referencing relevant research or other evidence gives confidence and credibility to both the providers and users of a service.

An exciting resource for staff to begin to explore research to inform their practice is the Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS).

GUS is an important long-term research project aimed at tracking the lives of a sample of Scottish children from the early years, through childhood and beyond. The study is funded by the Scottish Government and carried out by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen). Its principal aim is to provide information to support policy making, but it is also intended to be a broader resource that can be drawn on by academics, voluntary sector organisations and other interested parties. Focusing initially on a representative sample of 5,217 children aged 0–1 years (birth cohort) and another sample of 2,859 children aged 2–3 years (child cohort), the first wave of fieldwork began in April 2005.

www.growingupinScotland.org.uk

Every section of the *Pre-Birth to Three* guidance highlights findings from GUS that link to the nine features of key principles in practice. There are also signposts to other research studies for each feature.

Many organisations and policy makers also collaborate in research groupings to distil research findings in a way that makes the research more accessible to staff and others. One example of this is the Scottish Government’s Early Years Framework Research into Practice Group, which has multi-agency representation.

Four Key Principles for Best Starts and Positive Outcomes

The **Rights of the Child**, **Relationships**, **Responsive Care** and **Respect** are the four key principles which form the basis of this guidance. All staff working with babies and young children should be aware that these key principles are interrelated and interdependent.

Rights of the Child

Within the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) is the principle that children should be valued and respected at all levels and have the right to have their views heard and acted upon. This means that all adults and agencies should ensure when supporting babies and young children that their views are '...given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (UN, 1989, Article 12).

Children's rights are defined in many ways, including a wide spectrum of civil, cultural, economic, social and political rights. Effective approaches to early years and early intervention policy will contribute strongly to promoting and upholding children's rights as defined by the UNCRC and indeed those rights should underpin all policy for children.

Legislation governs the way children in Scotland are respected, most importantly through the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. The *National Care Standards: early education and childcare up to the age of 16* (Scottish Government, 2007) are also founded on principles that reflect the rights of children and influence how services for children and young people are delivered. The main principles are dignity, privacy, choice, safety, realising potential, and equality and diversity. All children have the right to thrive and be nurtured by adults who promote their general wellbeing, health, nutrition and safety.

Children are active citizens in the world and, from a very early age, children are finding out about their rights, often through relationships and the ways in which others treat them. They are learning about expressing themselves, their interdependence with others, how valued they are, and about sharing, making choices and their place in the world.





Inclusion and responsive care are crucial if children's rights are to be promoted effectively. Through working closely with parents and other professionals, staff in early years settings recognise that all those involved with children and families have an important contribution to make.⁵

All staff working with children have an important role to play in ensuring that children's rights are safeguarded and actively promoted. Children's rights and the respect that they are entitled to must not be overlooked just because they cannot necessarily safeguard their own interests.⁶

When adults make decisions that affect children they need to:

- have a sound knowledge and understanding of the UNCRC
- think first about children as individuals and what is best for them
- listen to children and take their views into account
- ensure all agencies are working together to help children and families to secure the best outcomes for themselves.

⁵ See section on Partnership Working

⁶ See section on Role of Staff

Relationships

Babies are genetically predisposed to form relationships; this is their strongest evolutionary survival mechanism. This important process begins even before the baby is born. Relationships begin with the care and attention that babies experience whilst in the womb. As a result of this, babies are born with a predisposition to form relationships and make connections with others. Relationships are essential to the baby's health and wellbeing, and determine their future potential and life chances (Balbernie, 2001).

Newborn babies are skilled not only in responding to others but also in initiating interactions. The ability to establish and maintain relationships is a lifelong process, but one that can be seen even in the first few days and weeks of life. Babies learn and begin to make sense of the world through responsive care, warm and accepting relationships, play, and being involved in everyday routines. Love is essential in building close and companionable relationships with babies and young children. Welcoming smiles, hugs, consistency and reassuring comments help babies to develop trust and an understanding that their needs will be met.⁷

Whilst children's early experiences play a role in shaping their future attitudes and dispositions, it must be remembered that children are able individuals in their own right. With kind and sensitive support, children develop the ability and inner strength to enjoy life and overcome many of life's challenges.

It is essential that all staff working with children are aware of their responsibilities in ensuring and promoting positive relationships and the impact this has on children's future outcomes and life chances. The importance of respecting children, and ensuring they are welcomed into a safe, secure, loving and familiar environment, cannot be overstated.



⁷ See section on Attachments



Companionable relationships result from staff spending time with children, and developing affectionate relationships that enable children to feel secure, loved and appreciated. Effective staff in early years settings give children their anchored attention as they play alongside them, observe and learn from them.

The Early Years Framework acknowledges this when it states:

‘The vision establishes a new conceptualisation of early years – that children should be valued and provided for within communities; the importance of strong, sensitive relationships with parents and carers; the right to a high quality of life and access to play; the need to put children at the centre of service delivery; to provide more support through universal services when children need it; and that children should be able to achieve positive outcomes irrespective of race, disability, or social background.’

(Scottish Government, 2008d, p 4)

Responsive Care

Responsive care means knowing and accepting children and respecting that they are unique individuals. Babies make sense of the world through adults, and the responses that they receive let them know that the significant adults in their lives are consistent, reliable and trustworthy, and responsive to their needs. As a result of adults being responsive and affectionate, babies start to trust the adults around them and are more likely to feel secure within themselves.

Responsive care means building close relationships with children, being observant of them and meaningfully involved with them. Adults need to demonstrate a sensitive and caring approach through words and facial expressions. Providing companionship, time and physical affection is essential if children are to feel, safe, secure and valued. Responsive adults need to be reflective and in tune with what babies are telling them and this enables adults to make sensitive and informed decisions about how to respond appropriately.

Children have different dispositions and preferences and there are natural differences in the ways in which they learn as well as the pace of learning. Effective staff pay close attention, for example, to how individual babies like to be fed, what they like to eat, and the way that they prefer to be comforted.

Establishing responsive care is crucial in ensuring effective and high quality provision for young children and their families. In many early years settings, a clearly defined key person system enables staff to build close, one-to-one, reciprocal relationships with young children and members of their family.



Respect

One of the most effective ways of demonstrating respect for children and families is where staff express a genuine interest in them.

Children's views, values and attitudes are shaped largely by family and more indirectly by communities, which can support parents to improve outcomes for themselves and their children. Respecting parents' knowledge of their children and learning from them about effective strategies are fundamental to successful practice. Encouraging self-respect and respect for others begins through the kind of experiences and relationships children have with the people around them.⁸

As children develop their own interests and preferences they become increasingly aware of their needs. Staff should consult directly with children where possible and appropriate. Children with additional support needs and children who are vulnerable in other ways often require individualised support for the consultation to be effective.

Children need a sense of belonging and a feeling of being appreciated and valued if they are to participate in and contribute to society, feel happy and thrive. Feeling included is essential for all children and is based on mutual respect and warm, reciprocal relationships.



⁸ See section on Transitions

Very young children have views and preferences. They benefit from being provided with opportunities to resolve situations through expressing their feelings and being listened to. Children should be consulted naturally in decision making, for example about resources and snacks. Children gain confidence and feel respected when they can see that their opinions shape and inform decisions that affect them.

The *National Care Standards* (Scottish Government 2007, p 21) recommends that all staff ensure children and young people, parents and colleagues are treated with respect and in a fair and just way.

Key considerations for establishing respect include:

- valuing diversity, in language, ethnic background, faith and family circumstances
- respecting children's values and social experiences
- being sensitive to and understanding differences, ensuring fairness, equality and opportunity
- having a sound knowledge and understanding of the UNCRC.



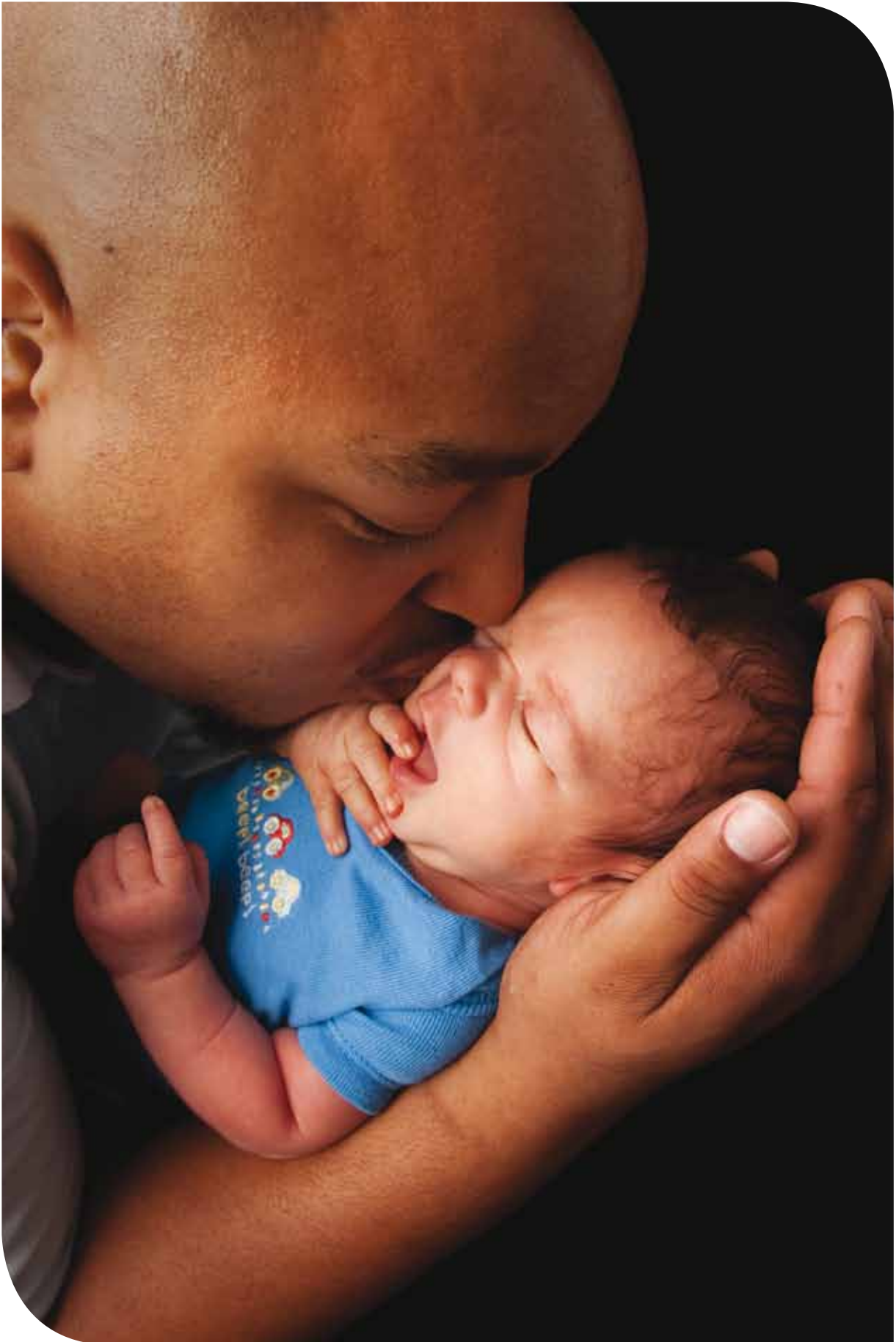


Nine Features of the Key Principles in Practice

It is suggested that the following nine features of practice may be an effective way of supporting staff as they implement the four key principles. These features are all equally significant and, as such, are not presented hierarchically.

- Role of Staff
- Attachments
- Transitions
- Observation, Assessment and Planning
- Partnership Working
- Health and Wellbeing
- Literacy and Numeracy
- Environments
- Play





Role of Staff

Staff working with Scotland's youngest children have a vital and rewarding role in promoting the **Rights of the Child, Relationships, Responsive Care, and Respect**. Understanding these four key principles enables staff to be more effective in supporting children as they learn about themselves, the significant people in their lives and the world in which they live.

Leadership and Direction

Staff bring their own qualities, values and principles to the early years setting and it is important to recognise the impact that these attributes have on children. Effective leaders promote distributed leadership at all levels, where staff and children are empowered and able to take lead roles within and beyond the setting where appropriate. Establishing a clear vision, identifying shared aims, and capitalising on individual strengths, impact positively on young children, staff and parents. Where leadership is distributed, all staff can be leaders, supporting, promoting and improving evidence-based practice.

It is necessary for staff working with children to engage in continuing reflection, where they consider what they are doing in day-to-day practice and why they are doing it, and ensure that it is evidence informed. High quality and relevant continuing professional development is fundamental to all staff working with young children in order to keep up to date. This can take many forms, such as discussion forums, visiting other early years settings, keeping up to date with relevant research and attending online, virtual or other conference events. Continuing professional development may involve staff undertaking a course of study at university, college or in their workplace. Technology can enhance this process, for example engaging in online forums or collaborating through Glow, which is Scotland's national intranet for education.⁹

Through developing leadership and engaging in continuing professional development, staff in early years settings build increasingly powerful self-evaluation skills.



⁹ See section on Using Research to Inform Practice

Self-evaluation

It is through ongoing self-evaluation that links are made between practice and what is known about how children develop and learn. Reflecting on practice individually and as part of a staff team is central to supporting the self-evaluation process in order to improve practice and enhance the quality of provision for all children. Ongoing evaluation is also essential if staff are to create a positive ethos in the setting and ensure that planning remains responsive and child focused.

The *Child at the Centre* states that:

‘The process of collegiate self-evaluation, by staff and with centre managers, works best when all working in the centre have a shared understanding of what is meant by ‘quality’. This often stems from a shared vision of what you as a centre community want for the children, and what you want your provision for children to be like in two or three years time.’

(HMIE, 2007, p 6)

Self-evaluation encourages staff to consolidate their thinking in relation to: the specific needs and interests of every baby or young child; progress relating to all aspects of children’s development and learning; communication with parents; and the ways in which the environment meets the needs of all.



Key Person

The key person meets the needs of every child in their care and responds sensitively to their feelings, ideas and behaviour. They offer security, reassurance and continuity, and are usually responsible for feeding, changing and comforting the child. The key person helps children to develop relationships with members of staff and other children. They skilfully observe children in their play, their relationships and in day-to-day activities, in order to inform future opportunities and experiences that best meet the needs and interests of children.¹⁰ The key person system also enables informed and sensitive communication with the child, family and other agencies, in line with the key components embedded within the *Getting it right* approach.¹¹



Roberts (2010, p 146) acknowledges that:

‘The Key Person approach is a way of working in settings in which the whole focus and organisation is aimed at enabling and supporting close attachments between individual children and individual staff. The Key Person approach is an involvement, an individual and reciprocal commitment between a member of staff and a family.’

Communication

Mutual respect and trust are important aspects of effective and open communication. Good communication is intrinsic to the work of early years staff as they share their thoughts, ideas and plans with colleagues, parents and, where appropriate, children.

Effective communication also involves staff acting as positive role models for children and parents, as parents may seek guidance on how to enhance communication, speech and language development for their own children.

Staff in early years settings use a variety of methods of communication to engage with and inform parents and other agencies. Noticeboards, sharing photographs, newsletters, texts, emails and other mechanisms can be used to record and share children’s achievements.

¹⁰ See section on Observation, Assessment and Planning

¹¹ See section on Partnership Working



Understanding and Promoting positive behaviour

All staff have a key role to play in understanding and managing the behaviour of babies and young children. Children often experience strong emotions and do not always have the capacity to regulate these emotions for themselves.

Very often, children's behaviour is their way of communicating a need and is reflective of their developmental stage and not meant to be intentionally challenging.

Staff, therefore, need to be equipped and knowledgeable both about the possible factors which may affect behaviour and a range of strategies to manage children's behaviour effectively and appropriately. Promoting positive behaviour is essentially about supporting the child's cognitive, emotional, social and physical development.

Supporting Children's Learning

Effective and motivated staff are naturally enthusiastic as they play alongside and support children in their learning. It is through these everyday interactions and relationships that staff help children to develop positive attitudes and a strong desire to learn.

Babies and young children are naturally creative and they benefit immensely from staff who adopt a creative approach as they encourage children to explore their world. Creating enriching and enabling environments, indoors and outdoors, which stimulate and encourage children to explore and play, help nurture the child's curiosity and creativity.¹²

Staff working in early years settings can foster creativity by valuing each child's uniqueness. They are best placed to guide children's learning and development through meaningful observations which take account of what the child already knows.

Staff should avoid limiting choices and experiences for children based on past experience and preconceived ideas. They should recognise children's abilities and potential abilities and should have high expectations, believing children to be competent individuals. Supporting and providing challenge for babies and young children appropriately is key to achieving positive outcomes now and in the future.

¹² See section on Environments

Reflection and Action – Role of Staff

- Reflect on why regular engagement with continuing professional development (CPD) activity is an essential aspect of the role of staff working in early years settings.
- As a team what are your CPD priorities? How do you know? What will you do next?
- As an individual what are your CPD priorities? How do you know? What will you do next?

Case Study – Role of Staff

Jessica is a newly appointed Head of Centre in an early years setting. A recent inspection report highlighted the need for improved approaches to self-evaluation, in particular evaluation of the quality of children's experience. The staff team have begun to reflect on, develop and improve their approach to self-evaluation in consultation with children and parents.

Discussion

What steps do you think Jessica and her staff should take to ensure their approach to self-evaluation is effective?

Signpost to Research – Role of Staff

In their best evidence synthesis for the New Zealand Ministry of Education, Mitchell and Cubey (2003) define what they believe to be the eight characteristics of effective continuing professional development for practitioners working with very young children. This synthesis of research was used to form the basis of the Te Whāriki approach.

Mitchell, L and Cubey, P (2003) *Characteristics of effective professional development linked to enhanced pedagogy and children's learning in early childhood settings: Best evidence synthesis*. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.

www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/series/2515/5955

See also

Scottish Executive (2007) *Growing Up in Scotland: Research Findings No.4/2007: Sources of formal and informal support for parents of young children*.

Attachments

Responsive and caring adults are essential for babies and young children to develop and thrive. If babies have a secure attachment to at least one person, they are more likely to develop strong relationships and skills to cope with challenges later in life. Having a secure attachment refers to the deep emotional connection that babies form with their primary caregiver, often the mother.

Attunement

Attunement is when the adult is able to tune in to babies' needs, perhaps by closely observing their sounds, expressions and body language in a responsive and empathetic way. The important process of attunement begins between mother and baby even before a baby is born with the care and attention they receive in the womb. As a result, babies are born already connected to people and the world around them. Attunement between the child and adult is the basis for enabling the child to develop further positive relationships as they grow and become part of the wider community. Although newborn babies have a natural disposition to interact with others, the process of attunement is a gradual one.





Bonding is the term that is commonly used to describe the deep and powerful connection between babies and the important people in their lives. Mothers can bond with their babies before birth, creating a strong connection which allows them to tune in to their babies' needs quickly and create secure attachments. It was previously thought that babies only bonded with their parents, but it has been known for some time that babies can bond with a number of significant people such as grandparents, siblings, staff in early years settings and carers (Roberts, 2010).

Attunement between the adult and baby helps to support the development of the baby's emotional health and wellbeing. In this kind of secure relationship, the child learns about emotions and this supports a positive sense of self. Babies and young children look for reactions and responses from people around them and they often mirror what they see. They respond to facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, eye contact and the kind of care they receive.

Secure attachments also help young children to develop the skills, values and attributes which are essential for them to become confident individuals, successful learners, effective contributors and responsible citizens. When babies and young children feel confident, they find it easier to get along with others and feel secure about exploring the world around them.

Positive attachments can help babies and children to develop resilience. According to Perry and Szalavitz,

'Children become resilient as a result of the patterns of stress and of nurturing that they experience early on in life.'

(2006, p 32)

Children can become more resilient through, for example, developing positive relationships with kind and caring adults who act as effective role models.

Strong relationships developed through secure attachments and attunement help babies and young children to develop empathy, the ability to understand the feelings of others. It is very important as it can facilitate and improve life chances as well as acting as a form of protection against developing aggressive and violent behaviour.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child in the United States of America asserts that:

‘Early, secure attachments contribute to the growth of a broad range of competencies, including a love of learning, a comfortable sense of oneself, positive social skills, multiple successful relationships at later ages, and a sophisticated understanding of emotions, commitment, morality and other aspects of human relationships.’

(2004, p 1)

Staff in early years settings can promote secure attachments and positive relationships through:

- being kind, loving and respectful when interacting with babies and young children
- developing a consistent approach to the care and wellbeing of each child
- being responsive to children’s needs and giving them confidence that their needs will be met
- building effective and respectful relationships with colleagues
- providing calm and safe but also challenging and stimulating environments which offer flexible, individualised and consistent routines
- making certain that children have caring relationships with reliable and attuned key members of staff
- ensuring a well-planned transition process from home to setting, acknowledging that the separation experience for babies and parents may require support
- showing respect for, and getting to know, children and their families.

Providing opportunities for children to develop close attachments and feel nurtured should be embedded in the ethos of every organisation. Building and sustaining strong relationships is dependent upon a shared understanding of, and a commitment to, the need for secure attachments.



Reflection and Action – Attachments

- Identify and reflect on the ways in which you ensure that babies and young children feel secure when in your care.
- How could you build upon these, introduce new approaches and measure effectiveness?

Case Study – Attachments

Charlotte is 10 months old and has recently started at her local early years centre. John, her key person, has observed that she is indifferent to the adults within the centre and exhibits no dismay when her mum leaves her every day. She does not appear to show any preference between known adults and complete strangers. John is concerned that Charlotte rarely smiles and does not engage enthusiastically in play activities. He has also observed that there does not seem to be a close relationship between Charlotte and her mum.

Discussion

What should John do in this situation to ensure that Charlotte's needs are being met?

Signpost to Research – Attachments

The following publication summarises a range of both established and more recent research studies on young children's attachments. The studies highlighted include examples from various countries and cultures, each demonstrating the major role that the early care environment has within a child's development and how attachment relationships can affect later outcomes and life chances.

Oates, J (ed) (2007) 'Attachment Relationships: Quality of Care for Young Children', *Early Childhood in Focus*, No. 1, The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

See also

Scottish Executive (2007) *Growing Up in Scotland: Sweep 1 Overview Report*, Chapter 4: 'Parenting Young Children'.

Transitions

Transitions are times of change; they are part of everyday life and take place from the earliest years. Transitions occur as children move from home to setting, from room to room, from carer to carer, when moving on from one setting to another, and during significant changes in circumstances. *The Early Years Framework* highlights transitions as an important issue in children's lives including the transition from home to an early years setting. *The Early Years Framework* also highlights that:

'Transitions in the lives of adults, . . . for example bereavement or family breakdown, can have a profound impact on young children.'

(Scottish Government, 2008d, p 20)

At times of transition, it is important that adults reflect on and take account of the four key principles for ensuring best starts and positive outcomes:

- Rights of the Child
- Relationships
- Responsive Care
- Respect.¹³



¹³ See section on Four Key Principles for Best Starts and Positive Outcomes



Transitions can provide exciting opportunities and also new challenges. Research, such as Dunlop and Fabian (2007), shows that the way in which the first transitions are handled could potentially have a significant impact on the child's capacity to cope with change in the short and long term. If transitions are well supported, children can learn to manage change in a positive way, which is a very important skill for life. Effective transitions can provide opportunities to help children develop self-worth, confidence and the capacity to be resilient in the process of dealing with change.

Moving on to different surroundings, a change in caregiver, or making friends in a new setting can be both exciting and challenging. Staff in early years settings can support children appropriately by ensuring that transitions are effective, positive and meaningful.

Partnership working with parents is key to supporting effective transitions. Parents can support staff in getting to know children well, whilst staff support parents as they adjust to change.¹⁴

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) advocates that children's views are valued and respected in society. When supporting babies and young children through transitions, staff should ensure that they know them well enough to understand their needs and wishes through, for example, interpreting gestures, sounds and expressions.¹⁵

Staff can support babies and young children through transitions by:

- building in routines that are familiar and welcoming
- working closely with all other adults who are involved with the child and ensuring that effective and ongoing communication takes place
- inviting parents to stay with the child as they adjust to the new environment
- encouraging children to bring a familiar object from home, such as a teddy or blanket
- providing opportunities for discussion, stories and play, helping children to express their feelings

¹⁴ See section on Partnership Working

¹⁵ See section on Role of Staff

- being closely observant of gestures and body language and tuning in to what is being communicated
- providing opportunities for siblings who attend the setting to see one another regularly throughout the day
- setting aside time to plan for and ensure smooth transitions
- recording shared memories that can be revisited to provide a sense of continuity
- ensuring experiences are provided which reflect their home life and culture.

Reflection and Action – Transitions

- How do you manage the transition process from home to setting, acknowledging that the separation experience for babies and parents may require support?
- Through consultation with parents and children, discuss ways in which you could develop and improve transition experiences for children and families.

Case Study – Transitions

David is three months old and he lives with his mum who is 17 years of age. They have no other family support. As the result of a referral from the health visitor and social worker, David has just been allocated a place at the local early years setting as mum is finding it difficult to cope with the demands of a new baby. David was born prematurely and has a number of medical problems that mean he is only able to sleep for very short periods of time. At a multi-agency meeting it was decided that five afternoons a week in nursery would provide David with a consistent routine and time for quality interaction with his key person.

Discussion

How would you plan for a positive transition to the early years setting for David?

Signpost to Research – Transitions

This international review of transitions concepts and research informs practitioners about rights-based early childhood policies and practices. It does not focus specifically on pre-birth to three practice, but rather on the underlying conceptualisations about transitions in early childhood.

Vogler, P, Crivello, G and Woodhead, M (2008) *Early childhood transitions research: A review of concepts, theory, and practice. Working Paper No. 48.* The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

www.bernardvanleer.org/Early_childhood_transitions_research_A_review_of_concepts_theory_and_practice

See also

Scottish Government (2008) *Growing Up in Scotland, Research Findings No.2/2008: Experiences of pre-school education.*

Observation, Assessment and Planning

Babies and young children are individuals, each with their own unique talents and abilities. Effective staff within early years settings seek to ensure that learning experiences, routines and activities build on information provided by parents and start with children's needs and interests.¹⁶ Planning begins with skilful and purposeful observation of children, and this enables staff to draw conclusions and plan next steps. Assessing children in terms of their progress and needs is an ongoing process and is integral to planning, observation and implementation. By using this information effectively, staff, parents and children, where appropriate, can create and maintain plans which help to provide a focused and individualised approach.



Making Observations

Making meaningful observations enables staff to get to know individual children well, ensuring that they are well placed to plan and provide for children's individual needs and interests. Observing children is a fundamental aspect of day-to-day practice and is the cornerstone of high quality early years provision. Adults, including staff and parents, should have a shared understanding of, and commitment to, the need for ongoing observations in supporting and promoting children's learning and development.

Observations take place naturally during everyday activities and interactions. Whilst some observations may relate to a need to find out about children, resources or spaces in a general way, other observations may be specifically targeted for particular reasons.

When making observations, staff can avoid being judgemental or biased in their interpretations by constantly checking that they are documenting an accurate picture of what they actually see. This record therefore should reflect, for example, the child's actual behaviour or responses rather than one which is influenced by staff assumptions or preconceived ideas.

Knowing when and how to share observations appropriately with colleagues, parents and other service providers is often a key challenge for staff working in early years settings. This is nevertheless a most important priority which has to be considered in a way that ensures the child's needs are at the centre of all decision making, in line with the vision, values and principles of *Getting it right for every child* (Scottish Government, 2008a).

¹⁶ See section on Transitions

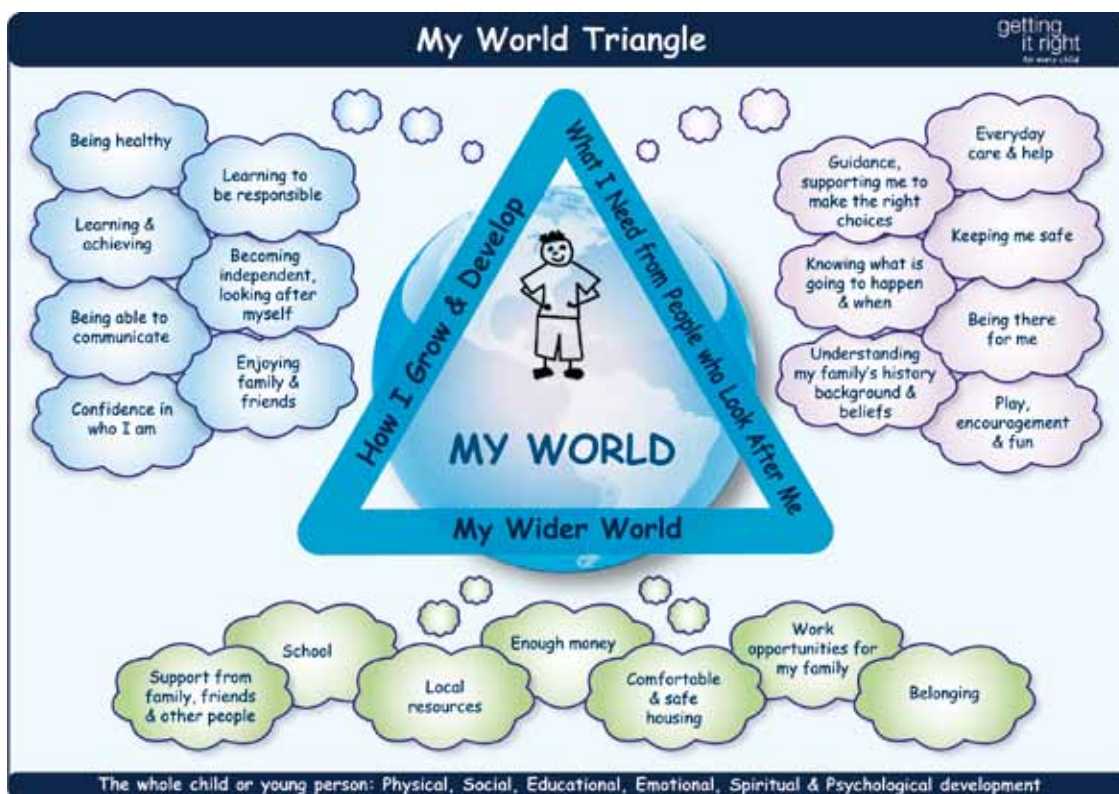
Assessment

Children have a key role to play in assessment and they should be encouraged to contribute to all stages as and when appropriate. Clearly, judgements about children's involvement in the assessment process have to be based on what is developmentally appropriate and also on detailed knowledge of individual children. Assessing children in relation to their learning and development can take many different forms, for example through observations or conversations. Staff need to be very careful to ensure, however, that conclusions drawn from assessments are indeed valid and reliable.

Working and communicating meaningfully and respectfully with parents, other key family members and relevant services is necessary if staff are to make valuable and accurate assessments of children as an integral part of the overall provision.



Staff and/or parents may consider that additional intervention is required to support a child's wellbeing, health and development. *Getting it right* provides staff with guidance to help ensure that children benefit from support which is appropriate, proportionate and timely.¹⁷ Staff may find the National Practice Model that joins up the *Well-being Indicators* and the *Getting it right 'My World Triangle'* helpful in the process of identifying concerns, gathering relevant information about children in more complex situations and analysing that information:



'When working with children or young people the My World Triangle can be used at every stage to think about the whole world of the child or young person. It is particularly helpful to use the My World Triangle to gather more information from other sources, possibly some of it specialist, to identify the strengths and pressures in the child or young person's world. This may include, for example, information about health or learning, offending behaviour or information about issues affecting parenting.'

(Scottish Government, 2008a, section 4)

¹⁷ See section on Partnership Working



Recording

Like assessment, recording may be a continuous process throughout the ‘observation, planning, assessment and implementation’ cycle. Records generally include observations and information from parents as well as staff and, where appropriate, children themselves. The information can be wide-ranging, depending upon the needs of individual children, and may include significant information relating to, for example, children’s development and learning, social and emotional wellbeing, likes and interests.

Selecting the most appropriate and effective recording technique usually depends on the particular focus and purpose of the record itself and how it is to be used. Records may take many forms from simple note-taking to video footage, pictures, photos or individual profiles or plans. It is important to ensure that any system of recording respects confidentiality, is manageable and is not too time-consuming.

Effective recording systems lead to clear records which take account of confidentiality but can be accessed readily so that they can be used, amended, added to and shared appropriately.

Planning

Planning is only effective when staff take account of children’s needs, dispositions, interests and stages of development. Flexible planning that assists staff to be responsive ensures that potentially rich and meaningful learning opportunities, which have not been planned, are also recognised and maximised.¹⁸

Building in time to ensure that colleagues share observations as they talk, plan and reflect together is also central to ensuring that provision for children is consistent, appropriate, caring and motivating.

If overall provision is to respond meaningfully to the needs of children, planning needs to be informed by observations and regular assessment, and it has to include information from parents and other relevant professionals. The key person system¹⁹ is extremely valuable in supporting this approach to planning, as the staff who know the children and families best can ensure that discussions and decisions about needs and next steps for children are on track.

¹⁸ See section on Play

¹⁹ See section on Role of Staff

To reflect a genuinely child-centred approach, staff need to acknowledge and value the child's voice meaningfully in the planning process where possible. The UNCRC emphasises every child's right to express their opinion and have that opinion taken into account.

Staff should place observation, planning and assessment at the heart of their practice and this process should be seen as a continuous cycle in supporting babies and young children. Taking meaningful account of the four key principles of the Rights of the Child, Relationships, Responsive Care and Respect should ensure that staff help families to achieve the best possible start for all children.

Reflection and Action – Observation, Assessment and Planning

- How do you ensure that your observations are focused and that you record significant information?
- Reflect on how you currently use this information and discuss the ways in which you could use it more extensively/effectively.

Case Study – Observation, Assessment and Planning

At a recent staff meeting, Gordon, the manager of an early years setting, was discussing observations of children's learning. He asked members of staff to share some of the observations they had recorded that week.

Whilst some members of staff said they hadn't been able to find time to record observations, other colleagues had recorded lots of very detailed observations. Through team discussion it was agreed that there needed to be a more consistent approach.

Discussion

How should Gordon support the staff team so that they reach a shared understanding of the process and purposes of observational assessment?

Signpost to Research – Observation, Assessment and Planning

Many staff working with very young children are already familiar with New Zealand's exemplary national curriculum, 'Te Whāriki', which has been developed for children aged 0–5 years. This research paper gives an overview of the principles and framework of Te Whāriki and appraises its early implementation. It goes on to discuss an action research project which trialled the use of 'Learning and Teaching Stories' as a user-friendly approach to assessment and self-evaluation in children's centres.

Podmore, V, and Carr, M (1999) 'Learning and Teaching Stories: New Approaches to Assessment and Evaluation' – Conference Paper, *AARE – NZARE Conference on Research in Education, Melbourne, 1 Dec 1999* [online]

www.aare.edu.au/99pap/pod99298.htm

See also

Scottish Government (2008) *Growing Up in Scotland: Sweep 2 Overview Report*, Chapter 5: 'Activities with Others'.

Partnership Working

‘A central issue for children and parents in the research conducted in support of the framework is the way that services engage with them, in terms of patterns of delivery and relationships with the people delivering those services. This implies a desire for a stronger and more personal relationship with a smaller number of people delivering services that meet a wider range of needs. This, in turn, implies a need for service redesign and new roles within the workforce.’

(Scottish Government, 2008d p 22)

Partnership with Parents

Staff working with children in early years settings naturally build meaningful and positive relationships with parents. Working with parents involves understanding and respecting differences, individual circumstances and the changing needs of children and their families. It is essential that all staff working with families respect and value parents and their role.

Being a parent can be a rewarding and satisfying responsibility. It can, however, be complex at times and some parents may find the experience of being a parent more challenging than others. There may be times when they need support and assistance from various service providers.





The Early Years Framework states that:

‘The period between pregnancy and 3 years is increasingly seen as a critical period in shaping children’s life chances ... a particular focus must therefore be on putting in place a strong and coherent set of 0–3 services that support children and families at this critical time.’

(Scottish Government, 2008d, p 8)

When staff listen attentively to parents, they show that they respect and value their knowledge, skills and experience. This approach encourages parents and staff to ask for advice and support when required.

Effective approaches to building positive partnerships with parents may include:

- ensuring a welcoming and warm environment for all children and their families²⁰
- ensuring joint approaches to planning, assessing and recording
- supporting parents in establishing a sense of ownership of the service
- building capacity, perhaps by offering classes and activities for parents, ensuring that information from parents is genuinely valued and taken into account
- developing effective communication systems
- developing links between the home and setting to ensure consistency of care for babies and young children
- creating dedicated space for parents to meet with one another
- consulting with parents as part of the self-evaluation process
- ensuring parents are an integral part of transition processes.

²⁰ See section on Environments

Partnerships Across Services

The vision, values and principles which underpin Scotland's *Early Years Framework* and also *Equally Well* and *Achieving Our Potential* support strong and effective partnerships across families, services and the wider community (Scottish Government, 2008). They recognise and advocate the need for multi-agency strategies which are driven by prevention and early intervention so that crisis situations are minimised or eradicated. There is a key commitment to building greater capacity for parents so that they can improve outcomes for their children and themselves. The frameworks aim, in particular, to help children from families who face the greatest social and health disadvantages and inequalities.

These frameworks all use *Getting it right for every child* as the methodology to support implementation. *Getting it right* is a national approach to supporting and working with all children and young people in Scotland. It includes all services for children and services for adults where children are involved. This approach is based on research evidence and best practice, and it is designed to ensure that all parents, carers and professionals work effectively together to give children and young people the best start and improve their life opportunities.²¹

The *Getting it right* approach will be supported by the *eCare Framework*, which is the Scottish Government's multi-agency tool for sharing key information about children who require the support of two or more agencies. This database aims to streamline the quality of service provision available for children and families. It also makes it easier for different agencies to share and access relevant information across professional boundaries.

Staff working in early years settings may be informed, or may themselves consider, that a child could perhaps benefit from some form of additional support. It is important that staff are knowledgeable and confident about the necessary procedures for taking this forward so that appropriate referrals can be made. This could relate to a change in circumstances such as bereavement or separation from a parent, or it could be as a result of child protection issues, disability or disadvantage. Other reasons for requiring



²¹ See Introduction – A Shared Vision



additional support may include, for example, children who are looked after or accommodated, children affected by substance misuse, children who have behaviour which is difficult to control, or those for whom English is an additional language. For some children, the need for additional support may be significant and may be long term. Whatever the reason or level of intervention required, supporting every child's needs through effective communication and partnership working is essential for getting it right for every child.²²

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act (2009) has been revised from the 2004 Act to include children under 3 years. This means that the significant benefits of intervention at the very earliest age are now recognised and supported by legislation.

Effective partnership working across agencies may include:

- being aware of who the key contacts are within relevant agencies
- developing strong partnership links with relevant agencies and within the community
- being knowledgeable and well informed about the roles and functions of other professionals
- sharing and accessing relevant information across appropriate agencies
- liaising regularly with service providers to ensure coherence and consistency
- advocating for children and parents where appropriate
- being aware that confidentiality is paramount in helping to build trust and confidence
- embedding processes of consultation and engagement with children and families in practice.

²² See section on Observation, Assessment and Planning

Reflection and Action – Partnership Working

- How do you demonstrate to parents that you respect and value their knowledge and understanding of their children? Discuss why this is important and the challenges you meet in your context.
- Why is it important to develop effective partnership working with staff from other agencies? Discuss some of the challenges and how you may overcome them.

Case Study – Partnership Working

Gemma is seven months old and attends an early years setting for three sessions per week. She has twin brothers aged 3 and a sister who is 5 and her dad works away from home.

On a recent home visit, the health visitor noticed that Gemma's mum was finding it difficult to cope with everyday routines and tasks. She also noted that Gemma had lost some weight and her personal hygiene needs did not appear to have been met.

Discussion

Who should work in partnership and what should they do to support Gemma and her family?

Signpost to Research – Partnership Working

This impact study reports on the wraparound care pilot projects in five areas of England: Cornwall, Ealing, Kirklees, Lancashire and York. One of the findings was that childminders have the potential to make a real difference to children's outcomes with the example given of childminder networks linked to early years centres.

Smith, T, Sylva, K and Mathers, S (2004) *Wraparound care: a model of integrated provision*, London: DfES.

See also

Scottish Government (2009) *Growing Up in Scotland: Research Findings No. 4, 2009: Multiple Childcare Provision and its Effects on Child Outcomes*.

Health and Wellbeing

Within the *UNCRC* (United Nations, 1989, Articles 24 and 27) is the declaration that all children have the right to experience a healthy start in life and to be offered a standard of living that meets their physical and mental health needs. It is commonly known that the earliest years of children's lives are critical to their development. Scientific evidence shows that health and wellbeing are determined to some extent by the way in which children's brains develop in terms of the relationships and the responsive care they receive.²³

Scottish Government policy frameworks, including *The Early Years Framework, Achieving Our Potential* and *Equally Well* (2008), all seek to address disadvantage and improve the life chances of children by tackling social, health and educational inequalities through prevention and early intervention.²⁴ The frameworks represent a strong commitment to a partnership approach, where the promotion of health and wellbeing relies on staff, parents and agencies working together to achieve the best start for all children. *Equally Well* makes clear that staff working with young children and families must not only respond to the consequences of health inequalities, but also, where possible, tackle its causes.

Through primary care services, *Health for All Children 4: Guidance on Implementation in Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2005a), commonly referred to as 'Hall 4', supports the policy frameworks in delivering preventative health care and health promotion. It targets effort on active intervention for children and families at risk. Health visitors have a key role to play in supporting and promoting the health of children and families and it is important that staff utilise this pivotal service.



²³ See section on The Importance of the Early Years

²⁴ See Introduction – A Shared Vision

Hall 4 guidance states:

‘The primary responsibility for children’s health and development rests with parents. However, they need information and support to fulfil that responsibility most effectively and all pre-school children and their families should, therefore, have access to an effective health promotion programme, delivered by the network of health, social work and education professionals through their routine contacts with children and families.’

(2005a, p 17)

Staff working in early years settings are in a strong position to be significant and positive role models for children and parents and they should be aware of their responsibilities in the promotion of health and wellbeing. It is essential that staff are knowledgeable, and able to provide the kind of support, including consistent healthy living messages, that help children and families to achieve the most positive health and wellbeing outcomes.²⁵

Nutrition and Physical Activity



A healthy diet and regular physical activity are crucial for a healthy childhood.

Nutritional Guidance for Early Years observes:

‘A varied and nutritious diet and regular physical activity are very important to ensure healthy growth and development in young children. In the short-term, they not only improve growth but also improve concentration and support children’s learning. There are longer term health benefits as well, as poor eating habits in childhood can lead to the development of obesity... a good diet in childhood can help to prevent the risk of serious diseases common later in life such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and osteoporosis.’

(Scottish Executive, 2006a, p 6)

²⁵ See section on Role of Staff

The Scottish Government promotes breastfeeding as the optimum way of ensuring that babies have the best start in life and receive all the nutrients they need. It is therefore important that staff are able to support parents who seek guidance about breastfeeding by signposting them to their health visitor, helplines or useful publications. Staff may also wish to promote initiatives such as the Baby Café, by providing a dedicated area for breastfeeding mums and displaying relevant materials (see www.thebabycafe.co.uk/ for further information).

Babies and young children need a healthy balanced diet to support brain function as well as other aspects of physical development. As soon as babies have been weaned onto solid foods at around six months, they should be offered a range of healthy foods and drinks supported by adults who encourage them to try out new tastes and textures.

From the earliest days, children can experience the joy of physical activity through play both indoors and outdoors and in all weathers. Play and movement are essential for brain development as it is often through play that babies and young children learn about themselves, others and the world around them.²⁶

These experiences also offer important opportunities for the development of fine movements, gross motor skills and social skills. Opportunities to experience planned risk and challenge through play encourage children to gain confidence in their abilities and in making decisions. *Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning* (2010) draws on the work of Muñoz (2009) to illustrate the important link between outdoor learning and associated health benefits:

‘The use of greenspace or ‘green exercise’ improves health. In particular, learning outdoors generally results in increased levels of physical activity. In addition, interacting with greenspace (walking, gardening, etc) improves emotional wellbeing and mental health.’

(Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010, p 17)

Encouraging regular physical activity and positive eating patterns from the start helps to establish lifelong healthy habits. These are the two main contributors to maintaining healthy weight and any concerns about a child being an unhealthy weight should be raised with the health visitor.



²⁶ See section on Play



Prevention

One of the principles of *Getting it right for every child* is:

‘Keeping children and young people safe: emotional and physical safety is fundamental and is wider than child protection.’

(Scottish Government, 2010)

Prevention of infection is crucial as babies have an immune system which is not fully developed, making them particularly vulnerable to infection. In early years settings, where adults and children are in close contact, infections can spread very quickly. These risks can be reduced by ensuring good hand washing practice and high standards of personal hygiene, and maintaining a clean environment. Frequent hand washing is one of the single most important ways of reducing the spread of infections and preventing ill health.

Similarly, children are particularly affected by second-hand smoke because their bodies are still developing. It is important that parents understand that the only way to protect children from second-hand smoke is to have a smoke-free home and car.

Staff can provide relevant information for parents on matters relating to safe environments and prevention of unintentional injury.

All children have the right to a safe environment in which to learn, develop, play and thrive.

Reflection and Action – Health and Wellbeing

- How does your current practice ensure that you remain up to date in relation to key health improvement messages?
- How can you further develop partnership working in your setting to promote healthy lifestyles?

Case Study – Health and Wellbeing

Sarah is 2 years old and has attended Anytown Nursery for the last 18 months. She lives with her mum and grandparents. It is only mum who has contact with staff in the early years setting. Sarah's lunchbox routinely contains chocolate spread or jam sandwiches, a biscuit and crisps. Despite the early years setting delivering the Childsmile Nursery Programme, Sarah's milk teeth are beginning to show the first signs of dental caries. Staff have attempted to raise concerns with Sarah's mum, who responded that as a single parent on a tight budget, she has difficulty accessing healthy food at a reasonable price from the local shops. Sarah's mum explained that she is dependent on the food purchased and prepared by her own mother.

Discussion

In what ways do you think the early years staff could support Sarah?

Signpost to Research – Health and Wellbeing

The following report takes a holistic approach to exploring definitions of wellbeing; one of its arguments is that most existing indicators create a 'deficit model' of childhood through focusing on the measurement of negative factors.

Wollny, I, Apps, J and Henricson, C (2010) *Can government measure family wellbeing? A literature review*, London: the Family and Parenting Institute.

www.familyandparenting.org/Filestore/Documents/publications/Family_Wellbeing_Literature_Review_FINAL.pdf

See also

Scottish Government (2010) *Growing Up in Scotland: Health Inequalities in the Early Years*.



Literacy and Numeracy

Literacy and numeracy are fundamental to all areas of learning. As babies and young children develop, being literate and numerate helps them to function effectively in everyday life and to contribute to society. The earliest years lay the important foundations for literacy and numeracy development, which can be built upon through lifelong learning.²⁷ The Literacy Commission has recognised that the first few years of a child's life are when many key stages in brain development happen.

'The important action is to build the preconditions for later learning ... In this way a basis is laid for success in later learning including acquisition of the fundamental learning skill of literacy.'

(Literacy Commission, 2009, p 8)

In response, the *Scottish Government Literacy Action Plan* was published in October 2010 to improve literacy in Scotland.

Children are born into a literate and numerate world. Adults can provide an environment that promotes and develops these vital skills.²⁸ Literacy and numeracy skills are essential in improving children's confidence and wellbeing, especially in relation to building meaningful relationships and understanding their own place and role in society.

Early literacy starts with attunement between parent and baby. Tuning into the baby's needs by understanding, respecting and responding to first sounds, facial expressions and body language helps to support early literacy development. Offering opportunities for stories, conversations, listening, rhymes, singing, mark making, environmental print, and creative and imaginative play are all effective and fun ways of developing literacy.²⁹

An awareness of numeracy and mathematical concepts starts from the moment babies are born. They are predisposed to seek out the shape of the human face and it is also known that, even at a few weeks old, babies take turns in conversations. Children may use their senses to explore, for example, the size, shape and weight of an object as they learn to identify and categorise shapes, objects and colours.



²⁷ See section on The Importance of the Early Years

²⁸ See section on Environments

²⁹ See section on Attachments



Staff can support the development of literacy and numeracy by:

- capitalising on the many spontaneous opportunities arising from daily activities, developing play experiences, dialogue, planned experiences and appropriate skilled questioning
- promoting discovery play using treasure basket and heuristic play sessions, which offer the baby and young child the perfect environment for development of early numeracy skills such as the concepts of number, counting, measurement, weight and capacity
- making use of the outdoor environment, including the local neighbourhood, as it provides children with opportunities for experiences such as recognising environmental print and exploring textures, shape, opposites, climate and space³⁰
- involving parents in their child's learning by providing a home lending library and keeping them informed of the stories, rhymes and songs that the child is learning in the nursery.

It is also important that staff have knowledge of any organisations that help and support parents who may have difficulties with literacy and/or numeracy.

Reflection and Action – Literacy and Numeracy

- In what ways do you ensure that children in your setting experience a variety of opportunities which promote and develop literacy and numeracy skills?
- What could you do to enrich and improve these opportunities, for example by making them more engaging, progressive and linked to real-life experiences?

³⁰ See section on Play

Case Study – Literacy and Numeracy

Li-Ling is 2 years old and has advanced communication skills. Her key person, Janet, has observed that Li-Ling has recently started to take an interest in environmental print, outdoors and indoors, such as shop names, numerals and labels on wall displays. It has become clear to Janet that Li-Ling is beginning to understand that print is a symbol used to represent particular things.

Discussion

How should Janet and the staff team support and challenge Li-Ling so that her skills, understanding and knowledge in literacy and numeracy continue to progress?

Signpost to Research – Literacy and Numeracy

The Literacy Commission acknowledges that while there can be influences on a child's literacy pre-birth, such as the quality of antenatal care their mother receives, the main focus is from birth onwards, recognising that the early years are a crucial time to address the negative effects of socio-economic disadvantage on learning. One of the examples cited from Glasgow research is that 'some children arrive at nursery at the age of three or even four with barely any language and poorly developed social and motor skills'. The Commission therefore recommended the introduction of pilot schemes in local authorities that serve areas of socio-economic disadvantage to provide continuous and systematic support for families with children aged under 3 years.

Literacy Commission (2009) *A Vision for Scotland: The Report and Final Recommendations of the Literacy Commission*, Edinburgh: Scottish Parent Teacher Council.

www.sptc.info/pdf/consultations/FinalLitComdraft1.5.pdf

See also

Scottish Government (2010) *Growing Up in Scotland: Impact of the home learning environment on child cognitive development*.



Environments

The environment, both indoor and outdoor, plays an important role in the development of babies and young children from their earliest experiences. Even before birth, the quality of the environment impacts significantly on the foetus's development in the womb.³¹ In the very earliest days a child's environment is mainly about the significant adults who care for them. From birth, the environment gradually widens to include different people and varied surroundings, both indoors and outdoors. Babies and young children are very sensitive to the ambience within any environment and therefore it is important that this is recognised and managed by staff in early years settings.

The importance of a child's environment is highlighted by Montessori:

'Adults can admire their environment; they can remember it and think about it – but a child absorbs it.'

(1967, p 57)



Children learn from, and adapt to, their environment as they build a sense of self from the attitudes and values of the significant people around them. Adults who are affectionate, interested, reliable and responsive help young children to develop a sense of trust and a positive self-image.

Most babies and young children are sensitive to the moods of those around them and they instinctively know when adults are, for example, relaxed, tense, preoccupied or keen to provide focused attention. Babies look for both verbal and non-verbal messages that communicate respect, value and love.³² These important messages can be demonstrated by staff in many ways, such as ensuring that children are always greeted with a warm welcome upon arrival at the early years setting.

Staff can also create a positive ethos within a safe, welcoming and nurturing environment, for example by:

- ensuring that there is a high level of involvement and overall sense of belonging for children and families
- responding appropriately and positively to children's needs and preferences
- respecting and valuing children's interests.

³¹ See section on The Importance of the Early Years

³² See section on Attachments



Planning for Positive Environments

A well-planned and sensitively thought-out environment helps to foster and promote a positive sense of self and wellbeing in babies and young children.

Goldschmied and Jackson maintain that:

‘Creating a satisfactory visual environment is not a once-for-all job but something that needs to happen continuously. Just as at home we are constantly making small adjustments and improvements, changing pictures from one place to another, moving a lamp or a plant, a nursery will only look inviting and cared for if the same kind of process is going on.’

(2004, p 22)

Planning and organising spaces effectively is a key and challenging role for staff teams. When planning for positive environments, staff should consider, for example:

- being creative with natural materials, light and other resources, perhaps to achieve an atmosphere of intimacy or a sense of challenge or wonder
- reflecting some aspects of babies’ and young children’s homes, communities and cultures, including images and messages which represent home experiences and recognise cultural diversity
- providing opportunities for babies and young children to use all of their senses in a variety of ways
- creating environments where children feel safe but not overprotected, thereby striking a balance between the needs of children to explore independently, and concerns about safety
- maintaining a degree of consistency in relation to the layout of the physical environment, as well as planning for change where appropriate.³³

³³ See section on Observation, Assessment and Planning

Environments and Resources

Children learn by using their senses, for example to investigate shape, taste and texture. They enjoy playing with real-life resources, such as real fruit and other foods, which they can taste, smell or feel, as this offers a holistic sensory experience with rich language opportunities.

The resources available for use, both indoors and outdoors, should present stimulation and provide opportunities for children to explore and be active. Children benefit immensely from having access to a wide selection of multi-sensory and natural resources which capitalise on their sense of curiosity and creativity.³⁴

Staff can resource positive learning environments in a variety of ways, for example by introducing familiar items, such as comfortable sofas, cushions or favourite toys from the home environment into the early years setting.

Resources should also be selected according to a wide range of factors, including the changing needs and interests of individuals and groups of children, the time of year, weather conditions and so forth. Children derive most benefit from resources when they are presented and organised in imaginative and creative ways. By ensuring that resources are both accessible and available to even the youngest children, staff create natural opportunities for independence, decision making and choice.



³⁴ See section on Play



The Outdoor Environment

Being outdoors has a positive impact on mental, emotional, physical and social wellbeing. The outdoors, which refers to the immediate environment attached to the setting, the local community and beyond, can provide opportunities for participating in new, challenging and healthy experiences. Most staff in early years settings understand that they have an important responsibility to ensure that regular and frequent outdoor experiences are integral to everyday practice for all children.

When making provision for outdoor experiences, staff can:

- enhance the outdoor area by ensuring the provision of a range of resources, such as natural materials, musical instruments, dressing-up clothes and tents
- maximise opportunities for literacy and numeracy development
- manage risk effectively by balancing the risks and benefits of outdoor learning experiences
- take full advantage of the benefits offered by the wider environment in respect of real-life living and learning, perhaps by making regular visits to local amenities and using public transport.

Reflection and Action – Environments

- Discuss how well you use the space you have available within your setting, both indoors and out.
- Plan ways in which this space could be organised more effectively. (You may wish to think about, for example, how welcoming your environment is and how much it invites creativity and enquiry in children and staff.)

Case Study – Environments

Anytown Nursery has just secured funding to develop an outdoor area specifically for the youngest children aged 0–3 years. This early years setting already has a well-developed outdoor learning space for children aged 3–5 years, which is used daily to extend quality learning experiences. Staff would now like to develop a quality outdoor environment for babies and young children. They do not currently feel confident about the prospect of taking this forward.

Discussion

What should staff and children now do to ensure that they develop a quality outdoor learning environment?

Signpost to Research – Environments

This briefing uses easily accessible language to explain the ways in which the 'quality of a child's early environment and the availability of appropriate experiences at the right stages of development are crucial in determining the strength or weakness of the brain's architecture, which, in turn, determines how well he or she will be able to think and to regulate emotions'. Other briefings in the series use research evidence to explore further basic concepts in early childhood development.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007) *The Timing and Quality of Early Experiences Combine to Shape Brain Architecture: Working Paper No. 5.*

http://developingchild.harvard.edu/library/reports_and_working_papers/working_papers/wp5/

See also

Scottish Government (2008) *Growing Up in Scotland: Sweep 2 Overview Report*, Chapter 5 'Activities with Others'.



Play

For many years, there has been ongoing and wide-ranging debate about the purposes and definitions of play. Theorists (see references) such as Froebel, Montessori, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Gardner and Laevers, have provided early years communities with frameworks to explore and discuss pedagogy and methodology in relation to play. These frameworks can widen thinking and help to ensure that research impacts on practice through creating play environments that are meaningful and appropriate to children's development.

There is a strong correlation between children's learning through play in the earliest years and the impact in later life.³⁵ Therefore, the importance of play cannot be overstated.



³⁵ See section on The Importance of the Early Years



Why Play?

‘Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child. Play can be fun or serious. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. By playing, children learn and develop as individuals, and as members of the community’

(NPFA, 2000 definition cited by Hunter Blair and McIntyre, 2008, p 5)

Play is a fundamental right for all children and one which is firmly embedded in the *UNCRC*. It is therefore essential that staff provide rich opportunities for children to experience high quality play, both indoors and outdoors.

Play is very powerful in promoting children’s development and learning. It is widely known that children need the freedom to play, to practise skills, explore the world around them, and develop knowledge and understanding in their own way and in their own time. There are many different types of play and children learn and play in diverse ways, as they have individual preferences, interests and needs.

Play enables children to:

- make important connections so that they can make sense of their world
- consolidate and celebrate what they know and can do
- act out and process day-to-day experiences
- thrive, develop self-confidence and social skills
- experiment with and manage feelings.

Planning and Supporting Play

Bruce (2001) suggests that as it has no end product, play can be viewed as a process. Children choose to play and their play is intrinsically motivated. Staff working in early years settings observe children learning through play, although it is important to remember that they also learn through many other types of experience too.

‘Sutton-Smith (1997) argues that play is progressive and can facilitate the development of knowledge and skills but acknowledges that it is not the only determinant of learning. Bennett et al (1997) have demonstrated the need to look at play not only as an opportunity for children to learn but also for adults to teach, or at least to pro-actively contribute to children’s learning.’

(Stephen, 2006 p 7)

Staff teams can discuss, explore and agree preferred approaches to providing and facilitating high quality, developmentally appropriate play experiences. Such discussion can be enhanced through staff ensuring that their own knowledge and practice is up to date and evidence informed.³⁶

In order to support play effectively, staff need to be knowledgeable and sensitive when making judgements about the timing and nature of interventions or interactions. One of the most important aspects of supporting play is ensuring that children have the time, space and freedom to initiate, plan, lead and conclude their own play. Children tend to be most relaxed when they can play in the knowledge that members of staff are available and interested, as this enables children to invite staff involvement, or feel free to instigate interactions with staff.

Bruner (1986) built on Vygotsky’s ideas and proposed that adults should support children by ‘scaffolding’ their learning through play. He explained that children can be supported in this way to move from where they are to their next level of understanding and learning. Scaffolding represents the purposeful interactions between adults and children that enables children to progress beyond their independent efforts. When scaffolding children’s learning, the focus ideally stems from the interests and desires of children and it requires staff support, interaction, guidance, use of language and practical activity.

Staff who are reflective and who continually review and consider their role in supporting children as they play know when to intervene, interact or use this time to make meaningful observations. Skilful staff naturally use these observations and take account of children’s interests and prior knowledge when planning and making provision for next steps and new experiences.³⁷ By adopting a playful approach themselves, staff can heighten and enhance the inherent values of play.

³⁶ See section on Using Research to Inform Practice

³⁷ See section on Observation, Assessment and Planning

Playing Outdoors

Increasingly, babies and children who attend early years settings are not only experiencing rich and stimulating play opportunities indoors, but outdoors too. *The Early Years Framework* emphasises the importance of making provision for children to play outdoors:

‘Outdoor play in particular can also be a major contributor to outcomes around physical activity and healthy weight. Developing play spaces, and play opportunities for children and removing barriers to play is therefore a priority.’

(Scottish Government, 2008d, p 18)

For many children, opportunities to be, or play, outdoors are few and far between. Staff in early years settings therefore have an important responsibility to maximise outdoor play experiences for children as it may be the only time they have to play freely and safely outside.³⁸ Many staff teams recognise the great outdoors as a rich resource and strive to use it as creatively and positively as possible. They often discover, too, that outdoor play does not necessarily mean purchasing expensive equipment, as the natural environment itself contains a whole range of materials which can be adapted, explored and enhanced in a variety of ways. High quality provision ensures that outdoor play extends beyond the outdoor area belonging to the early years setting and into the local and wider community.



³⁸ See section on Health and Wellbeing

Play and Risk

Opportunities for challenge and managing measured risk help to promote children's confidence and motivation as they learn to persevere and adapt to different situations. Environments and resources which are skilfully planned and organised, with challenge and risk in mind, can be flexible and appropriate to suit each child's interests and unique stage of development.³⁹ The benefits of risk taking can be considered as 'pathways to learning' as children learn effectively from discovering what works well and what does not. Being encouraged and well supported through such experiences also helps children to understand that not getting it right first time is just a way of learning. This healthy view of play as 'trial and error' promotes resilience, improves self-esteem and helps to generate a positive sense of emotional wellbeing.



Staff can plan for and support play by:

- making effective provision for high quality play experiences indoors and outdoors
- ensuring the development of positive relationships as part of the play experience
- consulting with children and families in respect of the planning and provision of play
- observing and taking account of individual and group needs when planning next steps
- involving children in selecting, organising and using resources effectively
- knowing the importance of, and reflecting, cultural diversity, equality and inclusion in the planning and provision of play
- understanding that brain development is affected by the environment, including relationships and experiences
- recognising that children are naturally curious and predisposed to explore their world
- adopting a playful, companionable approach

³⁹ See section on Environments



- building in opportunities for creativity, excitement, challenge, breadth and application of skills and knowledge in known and unfamiliar contexts
- recognising babies and children as competent, capable learners, thus avoiding the emergence of psychological ceilings which limit play benefits
- facilitating children's drive to explore, experiment and problem solve
- making provision for a wide variety of play experiences, such as treasure basket and heuristic play
- being flexible and responsive to individual interests and needs
- knowing how to extend and support play in thoughtful and imaginative ways
- documenting, sharing and using records and observations meaningfully
- keeping up to date by engaging in regular continuing professional development and using new knowledge to inform practice.

Reflection and Action – Play

- What do you think is meant by risk and challenge in the context of play? Identify and reflect upon how children experience risk and challenge through play in your setting.
- How could you introduce new challenges and enhance children's understanding and management of risk through play?

Case Study – Play

Joe is 28 months old and attends an early years setting for four sessions per week. He has made friends with a few children and has formed a good relationship with his key person Susan.

Joe likes to be active and recently he has been spending a great deal of time with construction materials, building towers and stacking objects.

Susan has observed that Joe likes to continue his building and stacking activities across all the different areas within the playroom.

Gradually, Susan has noticed that Joe seems to be doing the same thing every day almost out of habit. There no longer appears to be excitement, challenge or progression in his play.

Discussion

What should Susan do?

Signpost to Research – Play

A recent finding of the Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) study was that children who regularly take part in a wide range of activities and whose parents rate these as very important have higher cognitive ability scores at the age of 34 months than children who experience fewer activities and whose parents attach less importance to them.

Scottish Government (2009) *Growing Up in Scotland: The impact of children's early activities on cognitive development*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

[online] www.growingupinscotland.org.uk

See also

Play Scotland: Promoting Children and Young People's Right to Play in Scotland, which includes publications and research, www.playscotland.org



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