SUBJECT TEACHING in PRIMARY EDUCATION

Edited by

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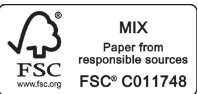

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CHAPTER 1

EARLY YEARS

Sue Fawson

Learning objectives

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe the role of the teacher in Early Years settings
- consider how children learn
- gain an insight into the Early Years curriculum and appropriate pedagogy
- devise relevant resources and activities for children in an Early Years setting that provide for exciting, enjoyable and effective learning.

Introduction

It is important to define the terms we use in this chapter. 'Early Years' has been the term used in different contexts for denoting children of specific age groups, such as pre-birth to three years, birth to five years, two to five years, three to five years, three to seven years and so on. In this chapter we will be using the term to mean children aged between three and five years.

The educational settings for this age group are sometimes part of a primary or elementary school or else a separate institution. They can be State-funded – the State having control or partial control of the curriculum and educational principles – or privately owned, so free to decide on their own ideals and practices. This type of setting may be called a preschool, children's centre, Foundation Stage unit, nursery, or nursery and Reception class, kindergarten or given other titles, depending on the country, the specific age range, the organisation, the controlling body and the philosophical context.

The term 'Early Years practitioner' in this chapter is used to mean a teacher or other professional (nursery nurse or teaching assistant) who is a confident and competent Early Years specialist, delivering the curriculum within a setting catering for three- to five-year-olds.

Teaching and learning in the Early Years

When non-Early Years practitioners (for example, student teachers or experienced teachers of 7- to 11-year-olds) are tasked with teaching 3- to 4-year-olds, they may have these contrasting preconceptions or feelings:

- 'This will be easy because the children only play; there's no "real" teaching or planning involved, no marking of work, no behaviour management problems, no need for detailed subject knowledge. It's much easier than teaching older children.'
- 'I'm very anxious because this is a "different world", one I don't feel comfortable with. I'm scared of making them cry or tripping over them. How can I teach them if they won't sit still and can't concentrate? If they can't do things for themselves, they will be reliant on me all the time – it will be difficult to meet the needs of all individuals in my class because each one will be so dependent and needy.'

Both views indicate a lack of knowledge of Early Years education.

Regarding the first view, being an Early Years practitioner is not an easy option: it is demanding intellectually and physically, and is time-consuming outside of the

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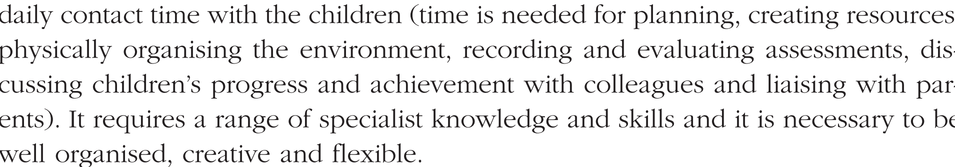

daily contact time with the children (time is needed for planning, creating resources, physically organising the environment, recording and evaluating assessments, discussing children's progress and achievement with colleagues and liaising with parents). It requires a range of specialist knowledge and skills and it is necessary to be well organised, creative and flexible.

The suggestion behind the 'only playing' comment is that playing is not important to children's learning. The reverse is, in fact, true, as playing is 'never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant' (Froebel, 2005: 55); it is at the heart of most learning and development for young children and should not be underestimated. There is, thus, a great deal of 'teaching' going on every moment of the day, but, because it is not always didactic or overtly imparting subject knowledge (a traditional view of teaching), it can go unrecognised to the untrained eye. There can be a great deal of planning and preparation undertaken by Early Years practitioners, too, and, while there is less marking and written feedback involved than when teaching older children, there is an enormous amount of assessment, recording assessments and giving verbal feedback in Early Years settings.

The 'fear' of this age phase expressed in the second view above is probably an easier one to deal with because it acknowledges the need for a different pedagogy and shows an awareness of the demands of the job. It does, however, reflect the traditional ideas of teaching furthering the development of the child's knowledge as such fear grows from not understanding how young children develop and learn. Once practitioners holding this view become aware that education for young children involves other areas of development as well as cognitive development, then they will be less anxious about the pressure of directly imparting knowledge to them.

The early stages of development in three- to five-year-olds does mean that teachers need to be well organised in order to meet the needs of all of the children, but it is a false belief that children of this age are totally dependent: it is surprising how much they can learn without direct input from a teacher, enjoying challenges and finding things out for themselves. As Malaguzzi, the main founder of the Reggio Emilia preschool approach (1998, in Edwards et al., 67), tells us, 'What children learn does not follow as an automatic result from what is taught. Rather, it is in large part due to the children's own doing as a consequence of their activities and our resources.'

It is good practice, then, for Early Years practitioners to begin to understand how young children develop and learn; only then will they begin to understand the pedagogical knowledge and understanding needed to be effective professionals in an Early Years setting. The next part of this chapter will discuss children's development and learning, and will suggest ways in which an effective pedagogy can be developed.

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Child development

Young children develop in the following different areas.

- *Physical development* This comprises fine motor development (small body movements, such as use of hands and fingers) and gross motor development (large body movements, such as running, kicking a ball, throwing, climbing).
- *Sensory development* The development of the five well-known senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch/feel. Also the development of two lesser-known senses.
    - *Vestibular sense* The sense in the inner ear that tells us if the head is upright and if it is moving. It affects our balance and sense of speed. This can be seen when children go round and round, either standing or while sitting, which results in dizziness and loss of balance. This gives some children a sense of pleasure – unless it results in sickness! It can also be seen when children run very fast, gaining pleasure from speed.
    - *Proprioception* This is muscle and joint memory, which is developed as a result of repetitive pressure on the muscles and joints of the body. This is sometimes why children like jumping down from a height – they are enjoying the sensation of the pressure put on their joints when they land. It is also a useful sense when developing fine motor skills, such as pencil control, as the repetitive action and pressure that is put on the muscles and joints of the fingers during handwriting practice helps the hand to remember the action. For example, it is easy for us to sign our name with our eyes closed because our fingers are used to the pressures and actions remembered as a result of writing our signature many times. This sense also tells us the position of the body. It is interesting to ask a young child to lie down on the floor so that his or her body is straight. Before the proprioception sense is well-developed, it is difficult for children to know where their body is and they may *think* that they are lying straight when, in fact, they are leaning to the side.

- *Intellectual, or cognitive, development* This area deals with the functions of the brain. There are six main components of intellectual development, which are:
    - concepts (knowledge)
    - problem solving
    - memory
    - concentration
    - imagination
    - creativity.
- Early Years practitioners see intellectual development as only one of several areas for development and do not treat it as more important than any of the other areas.

- *Language development* This is, in fact, part of intellectual/cognitive development, but, because it is such a large and important area of a child's development, it is usually seen as a developmental area in its own right. It comprises:
  - receptive language (comprehension) – hearing and reading, processing meaning and understanding
  - expressive language (communication) – verbal (speaking and writing) and non-verbal (body language, facial expression, gesture, mime).
- *Emotional development* This area involves developing an understanding of feelings. Children need to learn to name and understand different emotions in themselves and in others. Young children begin by understanding basic emotions, such as happy and sad, then continue to develop until they have an awareness of more complex emotions, such as fear, envy, jealousy, pride, guilt, empathy and so on.
- *Social development* The development of awareness of the self – of 'I' and 'me', of self-confidence, self-esteem, gender identity – and of social skills and interaction – the ability to share, take turns, work collaboratively, empathise, sympathise, help, have an awareness of others' needs.
- *Spiritual development* The development of the sense of awe and wonder (for example, at seeing a rainbow in a deep grey sky or a spider's web glistening when outlined by droplets of dew) and of calm and inner peace.

- *Moral and behavioural development* This is the understanding of right and wrong and what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour; also, the development of the understanding of rules and boundaries. Young children initially see things in extremes – everything is 'black or white'. It is only as they develop that they begin to see the 'grey areas' and understand the complexities and effects of context on the concept of right and wrong.

There is much literature on 'milestones of development' – these are the stages children generally reach by a certain age. While these stages are useful, to give us an idea of what we may expect of a child at a particular age, it is crucial to remember that all children develop at different rates, according to their genetics, environment and state of their well-being. Not all children develop at a steady rate – they can suddenly have a surge of learning or can plateau for a while or can even regress.

It is also worth noting that, while we use such discrete areas of development for planning and assessment purposes, children never learn in only one of these areas, but, rather, they do so in all areas, to some degree, in every activity they undertake.

How young children learn

Young children learn in an integrated and whole way, with all areas developing at the same time to a greater or lesser degree depending on the experience and activity. We call this way of learning *holistic*.

Young children develop holistically in a variety of ways, such as via:

- movement
- the senses
- copying, imitating, role models
- exploration and discovery
- trial and error, experience
- repetition and memory
- enquiry and natural curiosity
- receiving praise, encouragement and rewards
- direct teaching
- stories, songs and rhymes
- real-life situations relating to their own lives
- success and a sense of achievement
- personal interests
- play.

What is play and learning from experience?

'Children learn through play', this is irrefutable and yet this ubiquitous phrase is often used without any *real* understanding of what is meant by 'play'.

Play is an activity that gives pleasure. Does all early learning derive from play? No. Research has shown that children learn very effectively via play, but it is not the only way – a child can learn from being told facts, experiences that are not pleasurable (for example, touching something hot or falling from a tricycle as a result of taking a bend too quickly) or doing a task that he or she has been directed to do. While, of course, no one is suggesting that we *plan* for children to have unpleasurable experiences in order to learn, it is important to be aware of these other ways in order to really understand what we mean by 'learning through play' and prevent the phrase being used glibly.

Interestingly, not all early education pioneers in the past would dismiss the idea of learning from unpleasant experiences. Susan Isaacs believed that children learned best from *any* experience and was content to allow children to dig up a previously buried dead rabbit to learn what happened to the body or pull a worm in half to discover what happens (Drummond, 2000).

We can accept that children learn from all experience, but it is useful to consider where you personally would 'draw the line' and examine the reasoning behind your decision. It is probably based on your ethical, moral and sociocultural beliefs and government guidelines and legislation, which may change from country to country (for example, health and safety laws).

Principles and approaches

> The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life. (Plato: 425b)

These words from Plato, a Greek author and philosopher writing nearly 2500 years ago, highlights the importance of early education in a person's life. These same beliefs have been shared over the centuries by philosophers, educationalists, learning theorists, psychologists and researchers. Basic principles, approaches, pedagogy, and practice have changed, however, under the influence of fashion, culture, society, research and government intervention.

Over time, the 'nursery' has taken on different roles. In the mid-twentieth century, nurseries were cosy places where children were simply cared for physically. Then, as more widespread research identified the importance of early education and the potential for nurseries to enhance children's learning, Early Years settings developed a new set of principles, a curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Today, Early Years settings see their role as developing the 'whole child', furthering all areas of development rather than teaching to develop each area separately.

There are different sets of principles for ensuring effective early education, originating from different cultures, philosophies and research studies. From these we can identify the following main themes:

- each child is unique, will have different needs and may learn at a different rate and in a different way from other children
- there should be a relevant curriculum based on the children's needs and practitioners' knowledge of child development, which should build on children's prior knowledge and experiences, taking into account their interests and culture
- all areas of development are linked and equally important – practitioners should know that children learn holistically and should be active in their learning
- each child should feel valued and have opportunities to develop into a strong, confident and responsible individual
- a safe, secure and stimulating environment is paramount in children's learning and they should have access to indoor and outdoor environments
- practitioners and parents/carers should foster a mutually respectful relationship and maintain effective methods of communication.

(The above principles are informed by a variety of sources, including Early Education, 2012.)

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Different approaches to Early Years education

Different methods of early education can be seen in settings in different parts of the world, but also in neighbouring nurseries. Some settings have remained fundamental to the philosophy and principles of a particular approach, while many nurseries have taken on various aspects from internationally recognised approaches and integrated these to develop their own approaches.

The main philosophical tenets of each approach are too complex to explain in the space available in this chapter and it would be misleading to try to simplify their ideas and not give the full context. Therefore, we will simply list some of the major influential approaches and would urge you to investigate further:

- Reggio Emilia
- Steiner
- Montessori
- HighScope
- Te Whāriki.

One of the main reasons for needing to know about these influences is that some ideas that have been adopted can result in unexpected practices, such as in settings that follow the Reggio Emilia approach, where preplanning of the curriculum is minimal because the practitioners base the activities on the children's interests each day and flexibly change activities to follow their thoughts and attentions.

What can you expect to see in an Early Years setting?

In the classroom An example of good practice in an Early Years environment

Arriving at an Early Years setting, there is a covered area to park buggies, pushchairs and strollers, which can be a safety hazard indoors. The front door is security coded to prevent strangers from entering. The indoor entrance area is welcoming for parents and visitors. It shows what happens at the setting and reflects the ethos and principles to be found inside. There are also displays of photographs of the children engaged in a variety of activities, with labels explaining each one, and there is a parents' noticeboard to communicate important dates and events, as well as any messages from staff to parents. This is important, fostering

a partnership with parents and allowing them to feel involved in their children's early education.

Beyond the entrance, the interior is light and airy, having large windows to let in natural light and fresh air, with blinds fitted for very hot, sunny days. The walls are a mix of vibrant or pastel shades – there is no evidence to suggest children prefer bright colours and some Early Years approaches prefer more natural hues for walls. There are display boards with a combination of photographs of the children taking part in activities and examples of the children's work.

There are several distinct areas that have different characteristics. There is a carpeted area for children to sit or play on the floor and non-carpeted areas for messy activities, such as painting, water and sand play. The carpeted area of floor is a good size to allow the children space to move around, sit in groups or to work on floor activities. The non-carpeted areas have tables and chairs for writing and tabletop activities; all the furniture is child-size.

There are other areas created for specific purposes. For example, there is a book corner, with a variety of books and comfortable child-size sofas and bean-bags, and a role-play area, dressed to provide a setting usually linked to the topic the children are focusing on at that time. A separate room is set up as a sensory room, with a variety of lighting effects, music and sounds, and tactile resources.

Around the main indoor setting are storage cupboards, shelves, trays and containers for resources. They are clearly labelled and safely accessible to the children, which encourages them to make choices regarding resources and gives them the freedom to retrieve resources and sort and put them away at the end of an activity, promoting independence and responsibility.

Outdoor space is particularly important and, here, there is easy access to the outside – the children have the freedom to move between the two. The outdoor area has a secure boundary fence and comprises a playground area for gross motor activities (for example, running, riding tricycles, climbing the climbing frame, and may be painted with number ladders, roads and pedestrian crossings, islands and sea and so on); a grassed area, including a wild nature area as a minibeast habitat, and a sensory garden (where there are plants that have different perfumes, textural qualities, and make different sounds as the wind blows through the leaves); and a sheltered area for children if the weather is hot or wet.

There is also a kitchen where food can be prepared, a staff room and children's toilets and basins. Child-height sinks are positioned in the wet/art area. Coat pegs are labelled with the children's names and each has an image, too, for easy recognition, to help them become independent. There is also a supply of waterproof clothing and wellington boots situated by the external door so that the children can go outside in all weathers.

The curriculum

Many countries have a specified national curriculum for their Early Years education. Some are statutory requirements with additional guidance. Although these may vary and have differing titles, there are key areas of the curriculum that are accepted as being good practice in Western cultures. We need to be mindful, however, that a 'good' curriculum has to be relevant, so what might be deemed as effective in a nursery in London, for example, may be inappropriate for a nursery in rural Nigeria. Please consult the requirements and guidance for the country in which you are practising. Below are general key areas for an Early Years curriculum in a developed country.

- *Language* speaking, listening, reading, writing, drama.
- *Mathematics* numbers, counting, simple calculations, sorting, matching, sequences and patterns, shapes, measurement, comparisons.
- *Personal, social and emotional development* self-awareness, self-confidence, relationships, social skills, understanding of own and others' feelings.
- *Physical development* gross and fine motor skills.
- *Knowledge and understanding of the world around them* science, history, geography, religion, culture, technology.
- *The arts* art, design, music, dance, drama.

In practice, the curriculum is usually split into adult-led activities and child-led and free choice activities. It is common for the day to start with a welcome session, where the children sit in small groups with an adult and discuss what will happen during the day and there may be some direct teaching or introduction to a topic. There will then follow a range of activities that the children can choose from. It is usual for there to also be an adult-led activity where a small group of children at a time will sit at a table with an adult and have support and help to complete a task. With older children in Early Years settings it is common for this time to be used for specific language and mathematics activities.

There will be breaks in the day for a drink and snack (usually water or milk and a piece of fruit). These times are very important as they are opportunities for developing children's social skills (sharing, offering, saying 'thank you', being kind and fair), maths skills (counting, one-to-one correspondence, sharing equally, as a banana is cut into pieces, for example), knowledge of hygiene routines (toileting and the importance of washing hands before eating), general discussion about the food and drink (colours, smells, tastes, what it looks like inside and out, where it comes from, how it is grown).

The activities after the break are usually child-initiated and a free choice. The children have the freedom to move from activity to activity when they wish and can

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Table 1.1 Ideas for resources and activities

Area	Examples of activities and resources				
Water tray	Coloured water	Bubbles	A range of containers, funnels, tubes, water wheel	Fishing games	Sequins and glitter, shells, plastic toys, floating and sinking objects
Sand tray	Dry sand	Wet sand	A range of containers, funnels, wheels	Shells, plastic toys, spoons, small spades, lollipop sticks, twigs	Dry sand with water in a watering can for children to add as they wish
Art area	A range of paint, crayons, chalks, felt-tipped pens and other mark-making tools	A range of paper and card – different colours, textures, sizes, shapes; tracing paper, coloured acetate	Glue sticks, scissors, sticky tape, water pots, a range of different-sized paintbrushes	A range of fabric, wool, cotton wool, feathers, sequins, pasta shapes, shells and other collage materials	Reclaimed materials – plastic bottles, card packaging, card tubes, used greetings cards
Clay and malleable materials	Wet clay in a tray for moulding	Modelling dough – salt dough and manufactured modelling materials (ensure it is warm enough to be malleable). Gloop and flubber (see Internet for recipes to make these interestingly textured materials)	Plastic knives, plates, rolling pins, shape cutters, lollipop sticks, matchsticks, twigs, shells, pasta shapes	Picture cue cards, such as 'Make a fat cat and a thin cat', showing pictures of both. This will help with knowledge of opposites	Letter or number cards – the child can roll out a long 'worm' and shape it on the drawn letter or number
Role-play area	Themed, for example a real-life setting (a hospital or café) or a setting in a story or relating to a topic being studied	Child-sized equipment and resources, made for purpose (such as teapot and cups) and general objects (such as wooden blocks) so that children can pretend the objects are something else	Dressing-up clothes and mirror to see themselves Dolls + cuddly toys (to be patients or customers)	Opportunities for speaking and listening development, such as telephones, audio recorders and players, puppets	Opportunities for writing and drawing, such as notebooks and pens for taking a restaurant order or making a shopping list or writing paper and envelopes and a postbox
Gross motor activity	Climbing frames, slides, swings	Tricycles, scooters, pedal cars, pushchairs	Large building blocks	Large plastic tunnels to climb through	Dancing, rolling, running, jumping areas

(Continued)

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Table 1.1 *(Continued)*

Area	Examples of activities and resources				
Fine motor activity	Any pencil grip activity – writing, drawing, painting	Threading beads, buttons, simple sewing or weaving	Computer, calculator	Sorting small objects	Construction kits
Book area	A range of books – picture books and text (it helps for children to see printed words even if they cannot read them yet)	Comfortable seating, space so they are not cramped, sufficient light, opportunities to sit together and share books	Easily accessible bookshelves or storage – makes it easy for children to return books to the shelves, too	Story sacks – that is, fabric drawstring bags filled with items relating to a particular book	Puppets
Floor area	Wooden blocks	Road mat for use with toy vehicles	Construction kits	Large dominoes and dice	Large pieces of paper and markmaking tools
Tabletops	Dolls' house	Jigsaw puzzles and other games	Construction kits	'Play people' – small plastic people and animals, such as farm or wild animals	Laptops, tablets, paper and pencils

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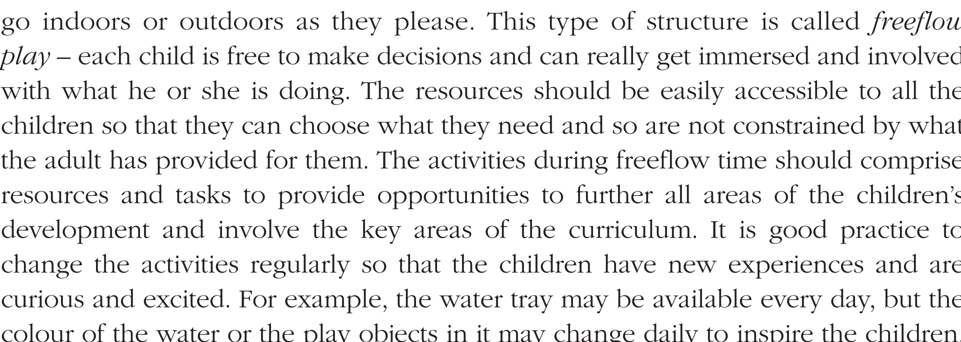

go indoors or outdoors as they please. This type of structure is called *freeflow play* – each child is free to make decisions and can really get immersed and involved with what he or she is doing. The resources should be easily accessible to all the children so that they can choose what they need and so are not constrained by what the adult has provided for them. The activities during freeflow time should comprise resources and tasks to provide opportunities to further all areas of the children's development and involve the key areas of the curriculum. It is good practice to change the activities regularly so that the children have new experiences and are curious and excited. For example, the water tray may be available every day, but the colour of the water or the play objects in it may change daily to inspire the children.

Table 1.1 suggests some basic ideas that you can take and develop to create your own resources and activities.

What is your role as an Early Years practitioner?

The practitioner's role follows the usual professional framework and abides by the same legislation as that of any other teacher, but there are additional aspects of the role specific to Early Years settings.

Often an adult is assigned as a *key worker* for a small group of children. This means the adult is responsible for that particular group at the beginning and end of the day and usually snack times and perhaps story times, too. The groups are sometimes called *family groups* and they enable the children to get to know the others in their group and attach to one adult in particular. A nursery can have a large number of children and adults, which can be daunting for a young child; a key worker can offer security and sense of belonging to the child.

It is important for the practitioner to get down to the level of the children, either by sitting on child-size chairs or on the carpet with them. When talking with children, you need to be a good listener:

- be patient – don't rush them or finish their sentences for them
- show that you value what they have to say
- take every opportunity to promote further thinking and language development.

If a child makes a grammatical error while speaking to you, don't tell them it's wrong or make a fuss, just repeat the sentence, correcting the grammar, and the child will learn from this without any negative feelings.

We must never force a child to do something. If we see that a child never visits a particular activity, we can encourage him or her to give it a try, but it may just be that it doesn't interest him or her. Like adults, children are all different, with different likes and dislikes. We need to respect their feelings and wishes.

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You have to be a performer! Young children are growing up surrounded by visual entertainment in the form of television programmes, computer games and so on, so they may not listen to what you have to say. No matter how introverted you feel you are, as a practitioner, you may have to put on an act and be larger than life. Sometimes you may need to dress up, use puppets with silly voices, sing, dance and be laughed at in order to inspire and motivate the children. You can also be true to your own personality, and, if you are a quieter sort of person, you will find that a sense of calm is invaluable. Learning happens when there are good relationships between children and the adults around them. Overstimulation is not the only answer.

As practitioners, we have to decide when to intervene and when to stand back and let children find out for themselves. It is very tempting to step in straight away when we see children struggling with a problem, but, if we do, then we are taking away the opportunity for them to problemsolve and learn from experience. Sometimes we need to just stand and watch, though this is a difficult skill to master! Equally, while we know that children learn well from experience, there are times when the support of an adult, to *scaffold* the learning, is most effective. *Scaffolding* means to break down a task into small parts and support a child in achieving those parts so that they can eventually find the solution to the problem on their own. It is not telling them the answer, but teaching them how to do the steps that will lead to them being able to find the answer. Talking to children about what they are doing is one of the most important aspects of your role.

You will also help to bring awe and wonder into the room or note when children are experiencing such feelings and help them to see the significance of this. Young children are naturally curious, but may not have opportunities outside the setting to see the wonders of nature or experience new tastes or smells.

In the classroom Looking at worms

I took some worms into a classroom of four- to five-year-olds. The children had not seen worms close up before and were transfixed. They were asking questions and debating with each other:

'Where's the head?'

'There!'

'No, that's the tail!'

'It can't be, it's moving that way!'

'It might have two heads!'

'It might be all tail, it doesn't have a head.'

'It has to have a head to eat.'

'But I can't see a mouth, or eyes ... how does it see?'

'It looks wet ... can I hold it ... is it wet?'

Assessment

Assessing children's achievement is a large part of our role. In Early Years settings, assessment is usually carried out by means of observations of the children during their activities. The practitioner will make notes on what he or she has seen each child do and will often take photographs, too. These notes and photographs are then put together in a file showing the 'learning journey' of each child. This evidence is then matched to assessment criteria, usually taken from the national curriculum and assessment guidelines.

The practitioner is paramount in establishing and maintaining a strong partnership with parents/carers. In some settings, home visits are arranged so that the practitioner can meet with the parents/carers to discuss their child's needs. There will be frequent opportunities throughout the year for parents/carers to visit the setting and the practitioner will provide regular information about the topics or current events there. At the start and end of each day, there is time for a parent/carer to speak with the practitioner if there is a concern.

There has been a clear shift in thinking away from the idea of the setting and home being very separate: today they work very closely together for the well-being and development of each child. This partnership with parents/carers is based on mutual respect and trust, practitioners valuing the contributions parents/carers can make to supporting the education of their child.

Reflective questions

- What opportunities are there for furthering children's development when they are having a snack break?
- In a role-play area, what opportunities are there for developing speaking and listening skills?
- You are in the outdoor area and children are engaging in a variety of activities. What is your role as practitioner? What might you be doing?
- What might you take into the setting to promote children's awe and wonder?

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Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to give a brief overview of Early Years education. It has attempted to give you a 'way in' to the fundamentals of good practice with three- to five-year-olds, but settings may differ in their philosophical approaches and organisation, so it is important to stress that this chapter is merely a starting point. It is important for you to discover the aims and principles of your particular setting by engaging in wider reading about the issues mentioned here.

Further reading

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