

## Chapter 1 - The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

This publication synchronises with the requirements of the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage 2014* (EYFS) for planning and assessment within the prime and specific areas of learning and development. It will support practitioners across the birth to five age range to reflect on the different ways that children learn, and to provide meaningful opportunities for learning to take place.

The introduction to the EYFS sets out its aims to provide:

- **'quality and consistency** in all early years settings, so that every child makes good progress and no child gets left behind;
- **a secure foundation** through learning and development opportunities which are planned around the needs and interests of each individual child and are assessed and reviewed regularly;
- **partnership working** between practitioners and with parents and/or carers;
- **equality of opportunity** and anti-discriminatory practice, ensuring that every child is included and supported.<sup>3</sup>

What the EYFS does not do, is categorically stipulate or advocate a specific programme for teaching and learning. However, it does state that educational programmes must involve activities and experiences that have a focus on the prime areas of development, namely:

- Communication and language.
- Physical development.
- Personal, social and emotional development.

The prime areas of learning are vital for establishing a child's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for *'building their capacity to learn, form relationships and thrive'*.<sup>4</sup> A sharp focus on these helps to ensure 'school-readiness' when the time comes for children to move on to more formal learning.

As children grow and develop practitioners must also support them in four *specific* areas of learning, through which the prime areas are strengthened and applied:

- Literacy.
- Mathematics.
- Understanding the world.
- Expressive arts and design.

Whilst the message is clear that neither the EYFS nor Ofsted prescribe an approach to teaching and learning, there is a danger that those settings who do not seek to define their approach and align it with the EYFS will flounder in the implementation of their educational programmes.

## The characteristics of effective learning

The *seven areas of learning and development* described in more detail in the EYFS, must shape educational programmes, but it is the *characteristics of effective learning*, listed below, that are the vital ingredients in bringing the prime and specific areas to life.

- **Playing and exploring** - children are engaged.
- **Active learning** - children are motivated.
- **Creating and thinking critically** - children are thinking.

These characteristics describe the 'self-regulated learner' and explain the actions that drive the child's learning forward. It is easy to dismiss these brief descriptors in the EYFS as stating the obvious, which may explain why so many practitioners are tempted to skim over them as they move straight to the learning outcomes. But the characteristics of effective learning are just that, 'characteristics' that every child possesses, and are in fact the building blocks for lifelong learning. The characteristics of effective learning are processes, rather than outcomes; they cannot be measured in terms of the extent to which they have been achieved, nor do they relate to specific ages and stages. However, it is essential that the practitioner is able to identify them when a child is engaged in any activity, in order to gain a better understanding of the child and to support their development.

Reference to the characteristics of effective learning is rather limited in the EYFS. However, they are more clearly explained in the supplementary guidance, *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage*<sup>5</sup>. This makes it clear that the characteristics of effective learning and the prime and specific areas of learning and development are inter-connected as the means by which children engage with other people and their environment - they underpin learning and development across all areas and are the foundations for the child becoming an effective and motivated learner throughout life. As Nancy Stewart<sup>6</sup> states in the introduction to her book about the characteristics of effective early learning, '*to truly support children in their early years to reach their potential, it is fundamentally crucial for the adults who care for and work with children to understand how children learn, and the key role which they play in fostering children's lasting ability to be effective learners and doers across all areas*'.

Practitioners should spend time reflecting further upon the characteristics of effective learning in order to understand the key messages contained in this publication. The fact that they are rooted in children's play and experiences chimes with the Alliance's belief that children learn through play. This means through first hand experiences that are child-led and that involve exploration and discovery; in other words, when they are active in their own learning.

## Play and the EYFS

The EYFS<sup>7</sup> states that the prime and specific areas of learning and development must be implemented through '*planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activities*'. Whilst the words *planned* and *purposeful play* may not be helpful for those, such as the Pre-school Learning Alliance, who believe that all play is purposeful, the document goes on to clarify this further by stating that, '*Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they*

learn to explore, to think about problems, and relate to others. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults'. The EYFS requires that there is an on-going judgment to be made by practitioners about the balance between activities led by children, and those that are adult-led. It will be helpful to briefly define what is meant by a child-initiated and an adult-led or guided activity overleaf, in order to begin to reflect upon the adult's role as a 'teacher' rather than just a carer and provider of activities.

### Values, principles and research evidence

The approach to teaching and learning taken by the Pre-school Learning Alliance is based on its core beliefs and values.

- Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. This starts from birth and continues throughout their lives. *Parents and wider family* are especially important for babies and very young children.
- Children learn through *play* and *first hand experiences* that are child-led and that involve *exploration* and *discovery*. Effective provision for learning increases children's *self-esteem* and *confidence* by *building upon what they already know and can do*.
- Children learn as members of *social groups*, such as their family, and the early years setting and the wider *community*. Parents and practitioners work together to create change in family and community life which enhance children's futures.

The core beliefs and values of the Pre-school Learning Alliance sit well with the focus on children's relationships and well-being, and the characteristics of effective learning described in the EYFS as demonstrated here:

Characteristics of effective learning	Relationships and well-being	Playing and exploring - Engagement	Active learning - Motivation	Creating and thinking critically - Thinking skills
<b>EYFS</b>	Personal, social and emotional development	Play and exploration	Active learning	Creativity and thinking critically
<b>Psychological theories</b>	Emotional self-regulation, relatedness	Dewey; Piaget; Vygotsky; growth mindset (Dweck); self-efficacy (Bandura)	Mastery goals; self determination (Deci); social cognitive theory	Constructivism (Piaget); social-constructivism (Vygotsky/Bruner)
<b>Pre-school Learning Alliance</b>	Health and well-being; feeling safe and secure	Play; first hand experience	Exploration; discovery; self-esteem; confidence	Building on what they already know and can do

Adapted from the 'strands of self-regulated learning' developed by Nancy Stewart.<sup>8</sup>

## Child-initiated activity

*'Playing children choose the content and purpose of their actions, following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons.'*<sup>9</sup>

In the simplest of terms, child-initiated activity shares many of the characteristics of play. It is about children choosing what they are exploring or playing with, based upon their own motivation and interests. This is the essence of what is sometimes described as self-regulated learning. It remains under the child's control at all times, but can be *enhanced* with adult support. The EYFS requires the provision of an *enabling environment* that is well resourced and full of opportunities, as this is vital for child-initiated activity where learning is taking place. Examples of child-initiated activity include:

- Jack, aged 24 months, is playing with a toy dumper truck; loading the bucket with small bricks, running it along the floor and emptying the bucket, trying to scoop up larger bricks, persevering until he has loaded them. His key person notes that he sits back and smiles, seemingly pleased with his achievement. He smiles encouragingly when Jack looks towards him, acknowledging his achievement.
- Lily, aged 38 months, brings a bag of seashells into the setting that she has collected at half-term. She lays them out on the table and begins to talk about walking along the beach and finding some of the shells in a small rock pool. A practitioner suggests that they turn the water tray into a rock pool. Lily decides what will go in the water tray and then asks if she can go into the garden to *'find leaves that will look like seaweed in the water'*.
- Daisy, aged 13 months, is playing with a shape-sorter on the floor. She takes the shapes and attempts to post them through the bars of the stair gate. Some of them do not fit, so Daisy pulls herself up and throws them over the gate instead. When she runs out of shapes, she repeats the game with puzzle pieces. Daisy's key person acknowledges the learning that is taking place and fetches the pieces from the other side of the gate so that Daisy can repeat the activity until she is ready for it to end.

In the examples given above, the characteristics of effective learning are easily identifiable when the practitioner observes a child engrossed in play that they have constructed for themselves and is undertaken for its own sake. The child is able to play and explore, following their own ideas and ultimately achieving whatever it is that they have set out to do as a self-regulating learner. What is often more challenging, is identifying and being confident about the adult's role during child-initiated play. A misinterpretation of this will often see the practitioner stand back and not embrace opportunities to support and extend the child's experiences, thinking mistakenly that any intervention from them changes the focus to an adult-led activity. Equally unhelpful and misguided is the practitioner who joins in and 'takes over' an activity. Between these two extremes, a responsive practitioner understands the need to wait and observe, to follow the child's lead and take on a supporting role, as seen in the examples above. The responsive practitioner knows when to step forward and, equally, when to step back. Each of the child-initiated examples has in fact been enhanced or extended by the practitioner's involvement and their use of effective prompts that have supported the learning that is taking place.

## Adult-led activity

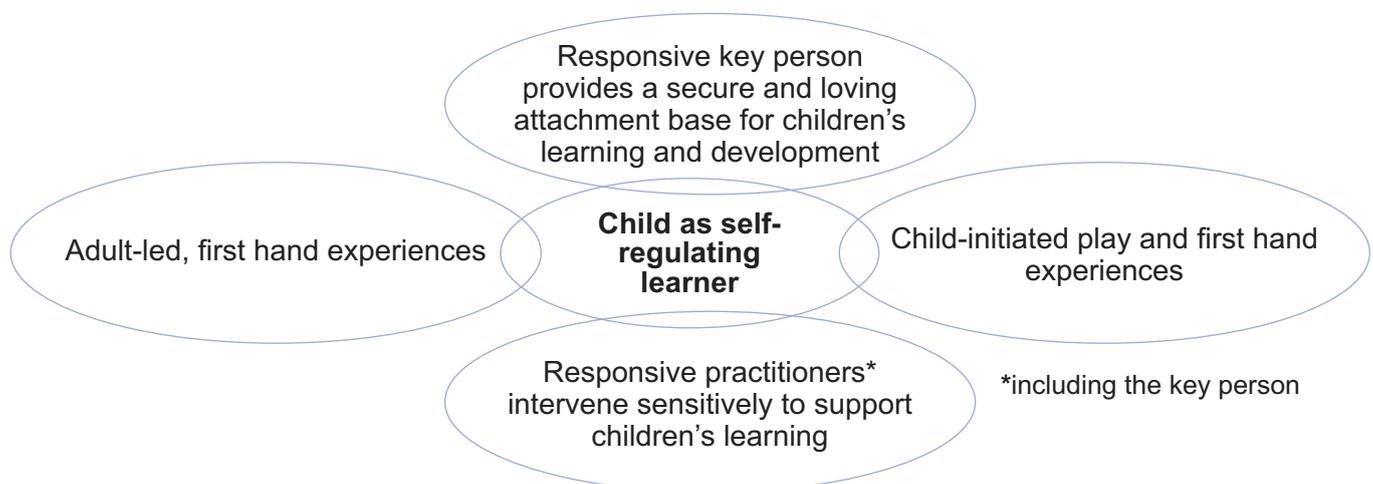
Adult-led activities are generally described as being initiated and usually planned for in advance by adults. This does not mean that they should be solely dictated by what adults think will be interesting or fun; after all, what an adult might consider to be a meaningful activity may well have little relevance to a child whose current interests and motivation lies elsewhere.

*'The activities are not play, and children are likely not to see them as play, but they should be 'playful' - with activities presented to children which are as open-ended as possible, with elements of imagination and active exploration that will increase the interest and motivation for children. As well as focused activities with groups of children, adult-led activities can include greeting times, story times, songs and even tidying up.'*<sup>10</sup>

In order to plan for adult-led activities, practitioners and key persons must be tuned into the interests, abilities and needs of every child in their setting, as well as their own role as a teacher supporting children's learning. Adult-led activities should be informed by the child's characteristics of effective learning that have been observed by the practitioner. The practitioner must also draw upon the same interaction strategies that they apply during child-led or self-regulated learning, for example:

- Giving guidance, demonstrating a skill or giving information that will encourage children to test their own thoughts and ideas.
- Giving choices and providing challenges, whilst giving children the confidence to express their own ideas.
- Collaborating with the child to complete a task by tuning into their learning style.
- Joining in with the activity, following the children's lead, and observing how and what children learn from their peers.

It is important to acknowledge that this applies to both child-initiated and adult-led activity. The diagram below helps to put this into context by demonstrating how the notion of the child as a self-regulating learner is central to both.



The diagram reinforces the notion that the key person/practitioner has a supportive role to play whether the activity is adult or child-led; and at the heart of best practice is the practitioner who recognises that the child, as a self-regulated learner, is central to the process.

### **Supplementary guidance to the EYFS**

The learning and development statements that appeared originally in *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage*<sup>11</sup> were only ever meant to be guidance to support the provision of effective practice within the EYFS. However, in some cases they have become a starting point for practitioners when they are planning and creating a learning environment.

In 2013 the Department for Education published *Early Years Outcomes*<sup>12</sup> which focused solely on the learning and development statements and the typical behaviour you would observe in children of different age bands, entirely removing the additional guidance given within *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage*. It is important to note that both documents were only ever intended to be a point of reference for practitioners to refer to when making a 'best fit' judgment about the developmental age band in which a child is currently working. Each document provides statements which demonstrate the types of things a child *may* be doing, such as '*can catch a large ball*' (Physical Development 30 - 50 months). This is not a goal, but an example of one of the many skills that a child may have mastered between the ages of 30 - 50 months.

In provision where practitioners do not fully understand how young children learn, there is a tendency to turn straight to the learning and development statements in either of the guidance documents and use them to plan activities. The statements then become a checklist outlining what each child can or cannot do and, worse still, a framework for teaching and learning. The original intention in producing the statements was that the child's learning experiences and activities, as observed by the key person or other practitioner, should be used to inform a judgment about the age band within which the child comfortably 'fits'. So these statements are more appropriately used to provide a best fit match with the child's achievements across all areas of learning.

Further examples of how the non-statutory guidance from *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage* and *Early Years Outcomes* should be used are woven into the text in the chapters that follow.

#### **Questions for reflection**

Am I clear about the requirements for learning and development in the EYFS and how my setting's approach to teaching and learning supports them?

Can I recognise and support the characteristics of effective learning as they drive children's learning opportunities?

Do I use the learning and development statements in *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage* and/or *Early Years Outcomes* appropriately to review children's learning as a best fit judgment?

