

introduction

The new revised simpler Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) introduces the three 'Characteristics of Effective teaching and Learning' which will help practitioners in interacting and supporting children from an early age with their learning and development. They are playing and exploring; active learning; and creating and thinking critically.

The EYFS Development Matters guidance states "The Characteristics of Effective Learning and the prime and specific areas of Learning and Development are all interconnected"

It is important that all early years practitioners understand these characteristics and how they link into their planning, environment and interactions with children and underpin their practice.

Development Matters extract: Page 4

The Early Years Foundation Stage Development Matters states "The ways in which the child engages with other people and their environment – playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically – underpin learning and development across all areas and support the child to remain an effective and motivated learner" (Early Education 2012)

the three characteristics of effective learning

In the Development Matters guidance the three characteristics of effective learning are set out as:

Playing and exploring – engagement

- Finding out and exploring
- Playing with what they know
- Being willing to 'have a go'.

Active learning – motivation

- Being involved and concentrating
- Keeping trying
- Enjoying achieving what they set out to do.

Creating and thinking critically – thinking

- Having their own ideas
- Making links
- Choosing ways to do things.

On page six of the Development Matters guidance there is a detailed table showing these three characteristics of effective learning and how they link to the unique child, positive relationships and enabling environment elements of the EYFS.

We will now look at each of the three characteristics of effective learning in detail, using the three headings, observing how children are learning, the adult's role in this and the environment adults can provide.

playing and exploring - engagement

Children will learn more skills and knowledge when they are engaged in what they are doing, so the first question you and your team should be asking is...

Is this child engaged in their activity/learning/play?

Finding out and exploring – we all know that children are engaged in their learning when they are able to actively explore for themselves and find and figure things out for themselves. This helps children to be active learners by learning for themselves, however as adults we need to provide both appropriate support and interaction and the enabling environment for this exploration and learning to take place in.

Children need time, space and opportunities to explore and investigate, providing open ended resources that offer a wide range of ideas, questions and solutions enables children to think for themselves and explore, often in completely different ways to your initial thoughts. All children regardless of their age and stage of development will be able to be engaged in exploring and investigating given the right mix of resources, environment and adult interaction, e.g. young children will be engaged in learning about different textures, taste and smells during mealtimes and this should be encouraged and developed by adults rather than restricted.

Open ended resources

Open ended resources provide a wide range of opportunities for exploration and investigation as well as adult led discussions and child led play, e.g. shape sorters are limited for their use due to their design, however using different shaped cardboard boxes and natural resources may provide the same opportunities that a shape sorter can, with a wealth of further ideas for exploration and investigation, e.g. model building, floating and sinking, imaginative play, story telling, music, numbers, discussion (both adult and child).

There are many open ended resources, and although you should not dismiss activities or resources that only have one or two uses, you should offer a balance to enable children to be able to lead their own play and investigations, e.g. treasure baskets and opportunities for heuristic play should be offered to all ages of children with age and stage appropriate resources available for them to explore and investigate with their senses.

Playing with what they know – children love to make sense of their world through re-enacting situations, activities and conversations they see in their life. This is one reason why role play opportunities are so important to children of this age. Varying these opportunities and allowing children to direct their own play and conversations will support not only engagement but also children to make sense of their surrounding and learn life skills, e.g. talking through their problems or understanding what happens at a dentist. Adult interaction may be required to support initial play and understanding but adults do not always have a role in a child's imaginative play and you should wait to be invited in if the children are engaged and active in this play. Younger children may wish to include a specific toy (e.g. their comforter) in different play opportunities to help them to feel comfortable, e.g. Flopsy the bunny may find himself in the pushchair one minute, and the

water play area the next. This is another way that children are able to make sense of the world in their own space and time,

Role play materials

Role play should reflect areas of the children's life, therefore offering 'real life' resources will enable this play to have more meaning and enable children to be further engaged and active in this play.

Play opportunities using the home environment are able to engage most children they will have an understanding of this environment, but this needs to be relevant to their own homes, e.g. ethnicity, family make-ups, do the resources in your nursery reflect the community you serve?

Other role play areas within the nursery should reflect the children's interests and needs for learning, e.g. if your children are apprehensive about their move onto school, would a role play area depicting the school environment help them to make sense of these feelings?

Being willing to have a go – in order for children to initiate their own activities and seek new challenges, as an adult you have to provide the support and resources for this to occur. If you are there supporting the child all the time, or if all your activities are adult led, how can the child initiate their own play and learn to investigate and experience things. If you do not provide open ended activities and play then again the children will not be able to initiate their own ideas, thoughts and learning.

Risky play

Children need to learn how to take risks in a secure and safe environment. If you as an adult do not support and direct this learning then children will not gain the skills and knowledge they need to be able to take them through the many hazards and obstacles in life.

The nursery environment is one of the best places for children to learn to take calculated risks and learn about their own 'risk management'. This does not mean you ask a child to complete a risk assessment form before each activity, but it does mean that as an adult you should support children to think about challenging themselves and to assess the possible risk involved of, e.g. going higher on the climbing frame, or using scissors without adult supervision.

Remember, some children will need their confidence and self esteem supporting for them to be able to take these risks for themselves. Look at your own body language too, if you look scared that a child is climbing higher on their own, the child is very likely to pick up on this and doubt their own ability to take this risk.

Active learning – motivation

Children will learn more skills and knowledge when they are motivated to take part in the activity

or complete the challenge set, so the second question you and your team should be asking is...

Is this child motivated to learn/play/take an active part?

Being involved and concentrating – children need to develop their concentration skills and begin to be actively involved in their learning. Part of this comes from the child becoming engaged in their play, so you can start to see how the characteristics of effective learning interlink.

Children will need support to develop their attention spans, and some children may need calming and refocusing more than others. Children are more likely to be actively involved in their activity and remain focused for periods of time if they are engaged and interested in this. Therefore as an adult it is vitally important to understand each child's interests, needs and strengths. You need to spend time constructively observing children and evaluating their progress and where they need support. Looking at what interests the child; what motivates and engages them; and providing similar activities/resources to build on this engagement. For example, if a baby is interested in the rattles and other musical instruments, but less interested in the sensory play elements of the room, moving the toys she likes to play with into this area will help to motivate her into this area, where she may become engaged in new experiences whilst using her known resources.

Time, space and opportunity

Children need time, space and opportunities to be deeply involved in their play, this cannot be rushed, should not be interrupted (unless absolutely necessary) and may or may not require direct adult support and interactions.

You cannot rush children's play or thought processes, and children like adults, may need peace and quiet to figure out a problem. Think back to the last time you have to think through a problem, e.g. what activities/resources you may need to provide for a child to move them onto the next developmental stage.

What happens if there is a lot of noise and interruption?

What happens when you are told to hurry up and finish?

What happens when you come across an obstacle you are trying to solve and another person swoops in and solves it for you with no involvement or discussion?

Think about how you felt, a child will feel the same way if you do the same to them. You may not see what they are doing as important, but the child does and sometimes they need time and space to work this out for themselves.

Keeping on trying – children will need to develop skills for perseverance and an understanding that not everything is simple and straight forward. Sometimes challenges are met that need working through and solutions finding. This is a life skill that needs to be developed with children from an early age.

Babies and toddlers will naturally learn this when they start to move, talk and develop their independence in feeding themselves and starting to choose activities and resources for themselves.

These developments need to be nurtured and encouraged. As the child becomes more and more independent, your role as the adult changes slightly although your role will still involve facilitating, supporting and championing.

Praise and encouragement

Your role as the adult involves a wide variety of responsibilities, part of this includes praising the child when they achieve their goal and encouraging the child when they need to persevere and keep trying to make that next step of their learning.

Adults are natural role models for children, so it is important the children see you trying hard and persevering when faced with a problem. It is also important for you to provide appropriate and timely support to a child who may be struggling, step in too soon and you risk taking over the situation just as the child is starting to make progress on their own, step in too late and the child may have lost interest in the problem and moved onto the next activity without reaching their desired goal. Each child will have their own individual personalities with their own capabilities and breaking points, as an adult you should know this in your individual children in order to support them to be motivated to keep on trying.

Enjoying achieving what they set out to do – this is not just a child reaching their own (or your) desired goal, but it is also the journey travelled to get there. As an adult it is vital that you do not concentrate purely on the outcome of an activity, but focus and praise the journey the child takes too, this is just as important for the child in many cases. Rewards for completion can not always be seen as positive for the children that are still travelling on that journey.

Allowing time for the learning journey

Each individual child will travel a learning journey in a different way at a different pace; do you as an adult support these different journeys? What about the environment, not just the resources, but the emotional and social elements of the environment as well, does this allow children to make their own journeys? Do you ask the children to tidy their activities away at a specific time? What happens if a child is not finished with their personal challenge or journey (e.g. a half completed model, a jigsaw with a few pieces to go, a piece of art that needs further development). If this was you how would this make you feel?

Look at your learning environment from the eyes of a child, what does it make you feel like, e.g. are you frustrated that you cannot see your own art work as it is too high up, are you able to access the resources you want to complete your desired task, or are they locked away or up high out of reach?

Using photographs of the children on their learning journey to enhance the display of their work or show development in their profiles, enables children to see that you value the process as much as you do the end product, sometimes more. Encouraging the children to take these pictures (wherever this does not interrupt the process) engages them in the learning journey further, these pictures are also ideal for showing parents the skills and knowledge their child has learnt on their journey, rather than just the end result.

Creating and thinking critically - thinking

Children need to think for themselves in order to learn and develop and become more active learners, so the final question you and your team should be asking is...

Is this child creating and thinking for themselves in a critical manner?

Having their own ideas – are you providing opportunities for true child-initiated play, i.e. are children able to have their own ideas and follow these through, finding solutions and finding new ways of doing things.

Child-initiated play should be just that, play that has come from the child. As an adult it is important that you respect children's ideas and use open ended activities, environments and resources to allow children to take the play and learning in their own direction.

Sustained shared thinking is a key support mechanism for aiding children to think critically for themselves. It is described as: "an episode in which two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend" Siraj-Blatchford et al (2002) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*.

Working alongside the child to work through a problem together or think about their next steps is an excellent way for children to learn skills for problem solving and sharing their ideas and thinking, which equips them for future learning and development.

Supporting children's ideas

Adults can extend children's play without directing it, e.g. asking questions like...

- What else is possible?
- What other ways of doing this is there?
- How can we solve this problem?
- Is there anything else you may need or would you like me to help you with?
- What do you think will be the answer to this problem?
- What would you like the answer to be?
- Who else could help you with this?
- Did you enjoy that? Would you like to try it again in a different way?

Making links – children make links from a very early age, e.g. babies make links between crying and attention very early on, they know if they cry someone will come and feed them, cuddle them or play with them.

It is important you continue to support children to make links and talk through their processes and build a learning foundation that focuses on the "how" as well as the "end result".

Testing out theories

Questions to ask yourself to see if your learning environment supports children to make links:

- How do your children make links and notice patterns in their learning, and how do you know this?
- How do you support children to share these links with you and other children?
- How do you support children to challenge each other's ideas and concepts?
- What opportunities do you provide for children to test out their ideas and make their own mistakes?
- How do you support children to make predications in their theories?
- How do you support children to persevere when their first attempt of testing a theory doesn't go as they first thought? How do you support children to see patterns to enable further theories to be developed? How do you help children to understand cause and effect in a variety of different manners?

Choosing ways to do things – children need to make decisions about their own processes, they need to think about the way in which they wish to do something, e.g. how will they carry the soil from this end of the garden to the other without spilling any? They may need to think about the process, the resources they need, the route they will take, whether they need any help and the desired result.

As an adult you will not only need to make sure that the resources are available and suit the needs of the children, but you will also need to be on hand so the children can talk through their challenges should they want to, or nearby so you can challenge or reassure the child that their efforts and ideas are paying off.

Role modelling

As previously stated, an important part of your status as an adult in the child's learning journey is as a role model.

Children naturally look up to adults to see how they talk, walk, react and operate. We naturally think about how we can role model some behaviours, e.g. being kind and washing our hands, but do we also model behaviours such as perseverance and trial and error.

Sometimes we are afraid for children to see us when we do not succeed at something and need to rethink an approach, but it is just as important that children see how we deal with disappointment, failure and challenge.

Talk to children about what you are doing and why, if it doesn't work ask the children why they think it didn't, and do not be afraid to hide puzzled looks, or disappointment.

Children are also very good role models for each other, providing opportunities for older and younger children to mix and share activities is a good way of not only sharing skills and knowledge, but also developing key elements of the PSED areas, e.g. caring for younger children, sharing ideas and resources.

So let's go back and look at the questions we asked in each section:

Is this child engaged in their activity/learning/play?

Is this child motivated to learn/play/take an active part?

Is this child creating and thinking for themselves in a critical manner?

If the answer is no - **why not?**

These are the questions you need to be asking throughout your time with the children, as this is one of the characteristics of effective learning.

how to practically incorporate the characteristics of effective learning into our planning activities, observations and evaluations

The characteristics of effective learning come under the headings of Unique Child (observing how a child is learning), Positive Relationships (what adults can do) and Enabling Environments (what adults can provide)

The Unique Child element mainly figures in your observation time, i.e. finding out what a child can do, what their interests and individual needs are, where they need support, where they need challenge and, also including from the characteristics of effective learning, **how** a child is learning. When you observe a child, the way you normally do, ask yourself... Is this child engaged? Is this child motivated? Is this child thinking for themselves?

The Positive Relationships and Enabling Environments mainly come into the planning activities and environments. Remember positive relationships is defined as 'what adults could do' and enabling environments is 'what adults can provide'.

Look at your planning systems; do you have an area in this system to log down the resources and environments you will need/use? If not, think about adding this into your system. Remember all the way through this process that children will learn and develop at their own rate and in their own way.

Yet again, look at the system you use, do you have an area to log down what the adult role is in this learning, e.g. key words of encouragement, supporting or challenging specific children, role modeling, adult directed learning etc.

If not, think about adding this as this will enable you to consider the positive relationships aspect when you think about planning for individual children and their development.

Evaluating

When you evaluate your activities and environment, either at the end of the day/week, or whilst you are engaging with the children, think about the following questions:

- Do the resources and environment enable children to be engaged in this play or learning opportunity? How do I know this?
- Am I supporting children to be engaged and think for themselves in this activity/area? How can I improve upon this?
- Do the resources and environment enable children to think for themselves and/or direct their own learning? Can I improve any areas or resources to aid this further?
- Are the children motivated to keep trying and think deeply? What areas of the environment or adult interaction can I change to improve this?
- Am I being an appropriate role model for the children, especially with trial and error?

characteristics of effective learning

further information

NDNA have produced a variety of factsheets to help you to support individual children's learning and development and prepare for the changes in the Early Years Foundation Stage, these can be found at www.ndna.org.uk

The Early Years Foundation Stage Development Matters can also be found at this website to purchase in a hard copy format.

The Foundation Years website has valuable resources for practitioners working with children in the early years and can be found at www.foundationyears.org.uk

The Early Years Foundation Stage Development Matters can also be found at this website.

Nancy Stewart and Helen Moylett have written a publication:

How Children Learn: The characteristics of effective early learning (2011)

This will support this approach further in your practice. This can be found on the Early Education website below, as Nancy Stewart is an associate of Early Education. There are also other resources available from this website which may benefit your practice.

www.early-education.org.uk

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