

## The importance of pre-school education

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The early years of children's lives are ones of rapid growth and development. They enter their pre-school years with a significant background of learning experiences within their family and with friends, neighbours and relatives. Many will have further experiences of learning through play in attending parent and toddler groups, playgroups or nurseries. During their pre-school years provision for children is continued in a range of settings in the private, public and voluntary sectors. At the same time many of a child's most valuable experiences will continue to take place in the home and the community.

Staff in pre-school education are therefore working in partnership with parents in developing children's learning. They should promote this partnership by learning about, valuing and building on children's learning experiences before and during their pre-school years. The vital contribution of pre-school education lies in developing and broadening the range of children's learning experiences, to leave them confident, eager and enthusiastic learners who are looking forward to starting school. Such an educational experience should be of the highest quality and based on the following:

- the best interests of children
- the central importance of relationships
- the need for all children to feel included
- an understanding of the ways in which children learn.

Having regard to the best interests of children means working with parents to recognise and give priority to meeting the individual needs of all children and at all times having regard for their welfare, safety and security.

It is necessary to recognise the central importance of relationships as the basis on which all learning takes place, whether in the early years setting or in the child's wider world.

The need for all children to feel included is of paramount importance. Participating actively from the earliest years has an important and positive part to play in ensuring children feel secure, are valued and have a sense of belonging.

The learning process is complex. All learners have particular ways in which they tend to learn successfully. Learning, to be effective, needs to build on what the learner already knows and an understanding of the ways in which children learn.

From these general principles pre-school education should aim to:

- provide a safe and stimulating environment in which children can feel happy and secure
- encourage the emotional, social, physical, creative and intellectual development of children
- promote the welfare of children
- encourage positive attitudes to self and others, and develop confidence and self-esteem
- create opportunities for play
- encourage children to explore, appreciate and respect their environment
- provide opportunities to stimulate interest and imagination
- extend children's abilities to communicate ideas and feelings in a variety of ways.

*Education of Children under 5 in Scotland (SOED, 1994)*

To achieve these aims involves much more than organising a set of resources for learning. Values and attitudes are communicated to children by what staff say and do and by the expectations set for their learning and behaviour. Children also learn from the quality of relationships among staff and between staff and children, and the co-operation of staff with parents and the community. In thinking about how these aims are achieved, it is therefore important to consider the ways in which staff value:

- the individual child
- equal opportunities and social justice
- partnership with parents/carers
- the importance of the community
- education as a life-long process.

### Children as learners

Young children come to early years settings as active, experienced learners with a natural curiosity. They are unique individuals eager to make sense of their world, to develop relationships and to extend their skills.

Children develop understanding in many different ways but they learn best in an environment where they feel safe, secure, confident and have opportunities for enjoyment. Children deepen awareness of themselves as learners by planning, questioning and reflecting. They consolidate this learning when they have the time and space to engage in activities in depth. They develop theories through investigation, first-hand experience, talk and play.

Play makes a powerful contribution to children's learning. It provides opportunities for children to:

- make sense of real-life situations
- develop awareness of themselves and others
- explore, investigate and experiment
- be actively involved in learning
- draw and test their conclusions
- develop self-confidence
- express their ideas and feelings in many different ways
- inhabit imagined situations
- act out and come to terms with experiences at home or with friends
- be solitary, quiet and reflective
- collaborate with others
- take the initiative on their own terms
- develop relationships
- practise skills
- consolidate previous learning
- be challenged in new learning.

The role of adults is central in supporting and extending children's learning through play.

## Taking account of younger children

The development and learning needs of younger children can be different in nature from those of children nearing school age.

The starting point for all learning is the child and this requires a recognition of the particular experiences that children bring to the early years setting and the ways in which these are fostered and developed. For adults this often involves negotiating the balance between the younger child's struggle to achieve independence and their need for ongoing emotional support.

Play is, of course, a central part of learning at this stage. While many young children are capable of playing together for extended periods of time they may still need adult guidance and support. They may need encouragement and help from adults in order to learn how to interact with other children. Adults need to be sensitive to the young child's abilities to co-operate with others, to take turns and to wait for help.

During early childhood children's attention and memory are developing. They may at times have difficulty in focusing on detail and tend to be easily distracted. As they develop, their concentration span will gradually become more sustained, particularly when their interest is engaged and when adults provide just enough support to enable them to experience success.

This is a time of rapid growth in all aspects of children's development. Adults need to provide daily opportunities that encourage children to practise newly developed skills and to plan for experiences through which they will acquire confidence and competence.

While young children need an environment that balances familiar and predictable routines with challenge and surprises, their confidence in coping with new experiences needs to be supported by adults who offer emotional support, praise and encouragement.

In taking account of younger children it must be remembered that they need:

- lots of support and encouragement
- ongoing praise and reassurance
- opportunities to develop independence
- time to build relationships
- familiar routines
- time to engage in new experiences
- small and secure spaces
- time to be quiet and to rest.

In order to meet these needs adults should:

- listen to what children say
- have realistic expectations
- make time for one-to-one activities and discussions
- be flexible in planning
- be consistent in responses and praise
- know when to intervene
- give more direction when teaching new skills
- allow time for 'settling in'
- introduce new routines gradually.

## The Curriculum Framework

The curriculum framework refers to planned learning experiences based on different key aspects of children's development and learning. A curriculum framework helps staff to plan activities and experiences that promote children's development and learning in:

- emotional, personal and social development
- communication and language
- knowledge and understanding of the world
- expressive and aesthetic development
- physical development and movement.

Each of the key aspects is expanded in the sections that follow. Each aspect is described in terms of a number of features of learning. These set out a range of learning to which all children are entitled during their pre-school years. These emphasise the importance of emotional, personal and social development, the acquisition of literacy and numeracy, the contribution of creative and physical skills and an ever-increasing knowledge of the world to young children's development. Of course children will vary in the pace at which they develop and progress in these aspects of learning. The range of differences in children's development and learning is considerable in the early years. Nevertheless, all children should have the opportunity to participate in and enjoy the full range of experiences described.

To facilitate planning each of the key aspects is presented separately. In practice, learning ranges across these aspects and one aspect is frequently reinforced by others. For example, two children using a plastic cup to fill a bucket with water may be involved in counting how many cups are required to fill the bucket, in discussing the results with each other and in agreeing to take turns. They may therefore be developing mathematical, language and social learning. A series of examples from practice in early years settings has been included in each section to illustrate this inter-relationship. Alongside some of the examples are questions that highlight messages contained in other parts of this guideline, and some suggestions are given for planning and development of learning arising from the examples.

## Considerations for practitioners

In planning experiences and activities that promote younger children's development and learning practitioners should consider:

- the extent to which contexts for learning link with children's own experiences at home and in the community
- the opportunities that are provided to build continuity between the home and the pre-school setting
- the range of opportunities for children to develop their social awareness and willingness to co-operate
- time and space given to engage in experiences and activities in depth
- the extent to which all children have the opportunity to feel included in activities and experiences
- the nature of adults' intervention
- the extent to which children feel challenged by activities and experiences
- the range of opportunities for children to be aware of and value differences.