



Key aspects of children's development and learning

Each key aspect sets out a range of learning to which all children are entitled during their pre-school years. 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.

Key aspects of children's development and learning

These are:

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

Emotional, personal and social development

Children's emotional, personal and social development is linked closely with other aspects of their learning.

Children in early years settings have to learn to cope with people and settings outwith the family. In doing so they need to become increasingly independent and able to form positive social relationships, particularly with other children. This is a significant step for very young children. It is assisted where there are secure, warm and caring relationships, where praise is given appropriately and where a sense of humour is encouraged. Feeling safe, confident and good about themselves is necessary in its own right. It is also necessary if children are to learn effectively.

The encouragement and support of staff will help children to develop self-esteem and self-confidence. Secure and stable relationships and careful supervision will help each child to feel safe and be able to express feelings. Children should be made aware of rules for their safety and know where help can be sought in cases of worry or upset. They should be helped to develop increasing independence in choosing, organising and tidying up during play, in dressing and personal hygiene and in serving themselves and others at snack- or lunch-time. They should be encouraged to persevere with tasks that at first present some difficulties but also know when and how to seek help.

The way that children feel about themselves affects the way they approach all learning and the way they behave towards others. As children develop confidence in themselves, they also form positive relationships with other children and adults, and begin to develop particular friendships with other children. In this process, they become aware of the needs and feelings of both themselves and others. Staff should encourage them to show consideration in their behaviour. They should make them aware that the need to consider others is often the reason for having rules.

As children form friendships and develop their skills, their play will often become more co-operative. Older children who have reached this stage will still enjoy and continue to need to play individually at times and this should be valued. Equally, the shift towards more co-operative play should be welcomed for the opportunities it brings for communication, learning to work in groups and to give and take.

Young children have a natural curiosity and sense of wonder that is important in emotional development. This can be fostered in simple ways through the observation of aspects of nature such as rainbows and the weather, the wonder of sunlight, night and day and new-born animals. Learning about cultural and religious festivals and events helps children to understand themselves, to build on their own experiences, for example of seasonal and religious celebrations, and to become aware of the beliefs and traditions of their own family and the way of life of others in their community. It helps to promote positive attitudes towards others in our multicultural society. Opportunities to care for others and for the environment will help children to develop positive attitudes and make them aware of ways that they can help.

The expression of feelings and responses to the natural world can be encouraged through story-telling, role play, looking at pictures and singing songs. In this way children can experience a range of feelings and human responses that help them grow emotionally. These same activities can help develop sensitivity to the needs, feelings and interests of others. This is an important part of personal and social development and helps raise awareness of different values and attitudes that will be encountered in a world of cultural diversity.

In emotional, personal and social development, children should learn to:

- develop confidence, self-esteem and a sense of security
- care for themselves and their personal safety
- develop independence, for example in dressing and personal hygiene
- persevere in tasks that at first present some difficulties
- express appropriate feelings, needs and preferences
- form positive relationships with other children and adults, and begin to develop particular friendships with other children
- become aware of and respect the needs and feelings of others in their behaviour, and learn to follow rules
- make and express choices, plans and decisions
- play co-operatively, take turns and share resources
- become aware that the celebration of cultural and religious festivals is important in people's lives
- develop positive attitudes towards others whose gender, language, religion or culture, for example, is different from their own
- care for the environment and for other people in the community.

The importance of emotional, personal and social development cannot be over-emphasised, particularly for the youngest children. For them, arrival in new and strange places can be an anxious and unsettling experience. They should be supported by providing a clear settling-in period with familiar routines and lots of support for both the child and the parent.

The links with home need to be made obvious and using techniques such as 'all about me' books can be helpful in building the bridge between the child's home and the early years setting. Older children can provide positive role models and partners in learning for younger children and can have a positive influence on the younger children's self esteem and confidence.

Children's emotional, personal and social development is linked closely with other aspects of their learning.

It is important to provide support where children might be afraid or apprehensive.

The children were encouraged to help in a practical way.

This provided a good context for children to talk about their different learning.

Examples from practice

One of the children went into hospital to have grommets put in her ears. The house corner was set up as a hospital with a bed, dressing-up clothes and hospital props. A display of hospital books and pictures was set up at the book corner.

Most children started to visit the 'hospital' regularly, taking part in lengthy role play and discussion, taking temperatures, putting on bandages and recounting their experiences of doctors and hospitals.

Staff also spent time in the 'hospital' observing the play, asking questions about the patients and events, and introducing some new vocabulary. Some children were given some reassurance about what happens in hospitals. The children made cards to be taken to the hospital to cheer up their friend. Staff also sat with children in the book corner, reading stories about doctors and hospitals, and encouraging the children to look at the books and talk about them. The local health visitor came to the nursery to talk about her work at the local health centre. When the child returned everyone welcomed her back. They were delighted to see how well she could hear and enjoyed exchanging information about hospitals with her.

Examples from practice

A tea room had been set up in the house corner. Some of the children were preparing food and others were dressed up to serve it at snack-time. One child, who was often restless, kept running into the tea room, shouting and asking for food. Some of the children were getting very annoyed.

The member of staff took the child aside and talked about how he was upsetting other children. Everyone would get a turn to work in the tea room. When his turn came, the staff praised the sensible way that he had behaved. When he was collected the member of staff mentioned this to the parent and asked for encouragement at home.

One of the staff noticed how much more settled he was after a period of energetic physical play. His keyworker made a point of starting the day with some physical play. Over a period he became much more settled in the nursery.

Some points to consider

How would you respond to this situation?

Was this an appropriate use of praise?

What do you think that the child learned from this situation?

Examples from practice

Shamila joined a nursery class in the middle of the first term. She was reluctant to stay at first and the staff invited her parents to stay with her. She quickly settled in but seemed to be very quiet and have a limited understanding of English.

Her mother noticed that the children often baked cakes and biscuits for snack-time and that sometimes parents led this activity. She suggested that she could make naan bread and chappatis with the children.

At the next baking session the nursery nurse helped Shamila's mum to make the mixture for the chappatis. Most children passed by the activity. However, as the adults began to stretch the chappatis a group of children gathered, one of whom was Shamila. 'What are you making?' asked one of the children. 'We eat chappatis at home' answered Shamila before any of the adults could respond.

Some points to consider

How would you respond to this situation?

What other activities could involve parents in helping children to learn about our multicultural society?

What might be the next steps in learning for Shamila?

Sharing information with parents will help to support the child.

It is important to provide support when children may be anxious or upset by change in their lives.

This provided a good context for children to talk about themselves and their feelings.

What began as a way of encouraging positive relationships and increasing self-esteem also led to children learning about their own growth and development of skills (Knowledge and understanding of the world) and taking on new vocabulary (Communication and language).

The children were encouraged to help in a practical way.

Examples from practice

Two of the children attending a community playgroup catering for two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half year-olds had recently experienced the arrival of a second child in the family.

A great deal of 'parent and baby' role play was being observed by staff. This included some rather aggressive play with the dolls.

Staff decided to set up the house corner with a baby bath with water, bubbles, sponges, flannels, a cot, high-chair, dolls, clothing and other props. They provided books about babies for the book corner and included a photo album where all the children were encouraged to provide a photograph of themselves as a baby.

Most children began to play regularly in the house corner, bathing the dolls, engaging in lengthy role play and discussion.

Staff spent time observing the play, assisting when asked to and encouraging the children. They were able to encourage the children's play by asking questions and introducing some new vocabulary. They used the opportunity to talk about caring for one another and the needs of small babies. They found that the aggressive handling of the 'babies' became less frequent.

Staff also used the book corner as a place to talk about when the children in the group were babies, using the photo album to encourage discussion and inviting the children to think of all the things they had learned as they grew. They encouraged the children's feelings of self-esteem by helping them to see how much they had developed and how much they could now do. The parent of the child who had been experiencing difficulties with the new baby brought the baby to the playgroup. The baby was bathed by the parent with the help of some of the children and then clothed and fed. The children were interested and involved and this provided a good context for talking about caring for others and discussion about 'when I was a baby' and 'my baby likes'. The children directed many of their questions and comments to the baby's brother, making him feel important and proud of his baby.

Some points to consider

How would you respond to this situation?

What further activities could be planned that would help the children to develop self-esteem and encourage them to consider the feelings of others?

What other methods could be used for involving parents?

Young children often have difficulty settling in to a new environment.

Links with parents and carers are important if a child is to become settled and feel secure.

A welcoming attitude that encourages parents to be part of the settling in process is crucial.

Providing a familiar object can add to a child's sense of security.

Encouraging positive relationships with other children and adults will help children to begin to develop particular friendships and feel involved.

Learning to settle in with others also provided a good opportunity to introduce Jamie to books, stories and rhymes in a small group (Communication and language).

Examples from practice

Jamie, three years old, is a new arrival at playgroup. He is having difficulty settling in, and separating from his father is distressing him. This is upsetting other children in the group.

The two members of staff agreed that one of them would be the chief carer of Jamie, making sure that she was free to greet him and his father on arrival and inviting them to look at all the activities on offer.

Jamie's father was encouraged to stay with him, involving himself in whatever Jamie found of interest. The member of staff stayed close at hand, showing interest in Jamie's play and involving herself gradually. She drew Jamie's attention to other children and encouraged other children to play alongside Jamie. She asked Jamie's father if Jamie had a particular toy or comfort object that he might like to bring from home with him. This added to Jamie's sense of security and his growing willingness to come to playgroup.

Gradually, as Jamie became more involved and settled, his father was able to say goodbye to him without distressing him. Towards the end of each session the member of staff observed that Jamie would become unsettled again. She encouraged him to sit with her and a small group in the book area. This allowed her to calm Jamie by reading books and singing songs and he was able to watch for his father's arrival from the window.

Some points to consider

How do you think the approach taken helped Jamie?

What do you think he learned from the situation?

How do you think you could further build on his experience?

Communication and language

The development of communication and language is linked closely with other aspects of their children's learning.

The development of children's skills in language is central to their abilities to communicate in relationships and learning, to understand ideas and to order, explore and refine their thoughts. From birth, children are part of a communication and language system that includes the body language of gesture, facial expression and movement as well as verbal language. Children will bring their own experience of understanding and using language in the home and community to the pre-school setting. Their home language should be valued and encouraged so that children can respond confidently to adults and other children, and express their own needs, thoughts and feelings. It is important to allow children to express themselves in a language in which they are comfortable during free play and social activities.

The pre-school years are an ideal stage at which to enrich children's language experiences by exposing them to different languages. At this age most children acquire language rapidly and easily from activities and experiences with a confidence that is difficult to achieve at later stages of their development. Some pre-school centres use Gaelic as the medium of learning, and some provide bilingual support for children in Gaelic or community languages, or offer experience in a European language in addition to English.

All of the opportunities to learn and use language that are detailed on pages 18–22 are as appropriate to learning other languages as they are to learning English. They therefore describe a language curriculum for all languages. The emphasis given to the development of children's competence in English and to the development of skills in other languages will vary appropriately with the aims of the centre and the needs of the child. However, it is important in such contexts to ensure that their overall language development is carefully monitored where the language used as the medium of learning is different from their home language.

In all types of pre-school provision, children should have opportunities to listen during social activities and play, to listen and enjoy music, songs, stories and rhymes, and to listen to instructions and information from staff. In some situations, children should be asked to listen with particular care and the reasons for careful listening should be explained to them.

They should also have opportunities to talk for a variety of purposes, for example to describe their needs and experiences, to ask questions, to take part in conversations, to talk about parts of stories, poems or rhymes, to explain and to make predictions. Careful listening and the use of open-ended questions by staff will help children to talk with increasing confidence and for different purposes. Engaging in one-to-one conversations with children allows adults to introduce new vocabulary and to encourage children to extend their phrases and sentences.

Children should be encouraged to develop an enthusiasm for stories and books by hearing wonderful stories and rhymes, by re-telling familiar stories, by browsing through books together and by using them to find interesting information. As well as realising that reading can unlock the meaning from print, children should also be encouraged to develop a curiosity about words, how they sound, the patterns within words and how they are composed. Captions and labels should be displayed and read together. Children's names should be recorded for them so that they become familiar with their own names. They should begin to acquire an easy familiarity with the names of some letters and their shape and sound. Many words in the environment will also become easily recognised as children make visits and excursions around their locality. In talking about stories and books, staff should introduce some of the language of books such as 'story' and 'page', and point out the directions of print.

In order to help children experience and understand the purposes of writing, there should be opportunities for them to experiment with their own drawings, 'mark-making' and written communication using suitable writing materials such as pens, pencils, crayons, paint and chalk. Writing is a way in which ideas and thoughts can be exchanged. For younger children this can be expressed through drawings, mark-making and in the exchange of drawings, cards and messages. The use of captions and scribing will help them to recognise the link between the spoken and written word. The use of pictures, charts, familiar letters and words will help children to distinguish between the use of upper and lower case letters, especially in their own name. Some children will be able to write their own name using both upper and lower case letters.

In communication and language, children should learn to:

- have fun with language and making stories
- listen to other children and adults during social activities and play
- listen with enjoyment and respond to stories, songs, music, rhymes and other poetry
- listen and respond to the sounds and rhythm of words in stories, songs, music and rhymes
- pay attention to information and instructions from an adult
- talk to other children or with an adult about themselves and their experiences
- express needs, thoughts and feelings with increasing confidence in speech and non-verbal language
- take part in short and more extended conversations
- use talk during role play and re-tell a story or rhyme
- use language for a variety of purposes, for example to describe, explain, predict, ask questions and develop ideas
- use books to find interesting information
- recognise the link between the written and spoken word
- understand some of the language and layout of books
- develop an awareness of letter names and sounds in the context of play experiences
- use their own drawings and written marks to express ideas and feelings
- experiment with symbols, letters and, in some cases, words in writing
- recognise some familiar words and letters, for example the initial letter in their name

Young children need lots of opportunities to have fun with words and to enjoy familiar songs, finger play and rhymes. They particularly enjoy songs with lots of repetition and this helps to anchor their newly developed abilities and encourages them to use more complex language structures.

Adults can provide good models of language by listening to children, taking time to talk with them in one-to-one conversations and helping them to understand the need to 'take turns' during conversations. It is important to remember, however, that young children vary greatly in their language abilities and adults need to be sensitive to this when planning activities in which all children can participate. Children who are reticent and unwilling to speak in front of others will need lots of support, encouragement and time.

Encouraging young children to talk about pictures, to 'read' picture books and to re-tell favourite stories to adults and other children provides a foundation for later reading skills.

Children often talk and listen well when they: are talking about personal experience, are interested in the topic, have a picture, object or photograph to focus their attention.

What started as a discussion (Communication and language) ended as learning about their own growth and change (Knowledge and understanding of the world) and was a creative and aesthetic experience.

Examples from practice

Robert came in one morning with news of the birth of his sister. He had brought a photograph of her when she was two hours old.

A group of children gathered round with one of the staff to hear the news and look at the photograph. The child was asked to describe how he had visited his mum and the baby in hospital and had held the baby. He talked well about the visit and told everyone how excited he had been. The children listened carefully and some asked questions. Many of them began talking about their own smaller brothers and sisters. Everyone in the group took part in the conversation. More photographs appeared the following day, some showing the children as babies. A display was made and children looked at the photographs. They were encouraged to talk about how they had grown and changed since the photographs were taken. They also talked about some of the things that they could now do on their own. Many of the children painted expressive paintings of babies in their families.

Examples from practice

While out for a walk, a child noticed a car with an 'L'-plate. 'Look that's what my mummy's name starts with!'

The meaning of the 'L' plate on the car was discussed with children. An alphabet book was used to find other words beginning with 'L'. With adult help, children's names beginning with 'L' were identified and a display made on the wall. Two children listened to and sang an alphabet song from a tape.

Some children went on to construct an 'L' plate from big blocks. Picture books about cars, a driver's licence and a copy of the Green Cross Code were added to the display. A play mat with small cars, road signs and figures was set out and some children played with this over a few days.

A small group of children continued to point out letters from captions in the nursery. Staff decided to plan some learning experiences that would build on this in the coming weeks. These included looking at alphabet books with the children, playing games such as 'I Spy', encouraging the children to observe as staff were writing their names on their paintings and talking about the initial letter and sound of their own name.

Some points to consider

How could this be developed to enhance children's learning?

How could parents be involved?

Examples from practice

A parent was reading nursery rhymes to a group of children. She missed out the last word of each line and the children called it out and laughed.

'Try this one,' she said 'Humpty Dumpty sat on a fence!' The children called out the correct word. A few children made up their own examples for others to guess.

Later the children were shown rhymes in big book from which they could easily follow the words and were beginning to identify key words. They were shown the same rhyme in a small book and a big book and the children compared the rhymes and found the corresponding words.

Some points to consider

What other ways can you use to help children enjoy nursery rhymes?

How could the children be encouraged to take a lead in this activity?

How could interest in words and their sounds be developed further?

How could parents be involved?

Close links between home and the centre enable children's learning needs to be picked up on and met.

Children need to be able to talk to other children and adults about themselves and their experiences.

In a secure environment children will listen with enjoyment and express their own feelings.

Children were using language for a variety of purposes. They were playing co-operatively, sharing resources whilst they developed their self-confidence (Emotional, personal and social development).

Examples from practice

It was autumn and the children had been talking about light and dark as the nights grew longer. Some of the younger children's parents were talking about their children being afraid of the dark at bedtime.

The book corner was developed by adding books about night-time. Children were encouraged to talk about their feelings about the dark.

As the children became more confident, another book corner was placed in a dark corner and children huddled together to hear stories about the night read by torchlight. Children chose to play in this area with books and torches, showing increasing confidence in both coping with the dark and expressing feelings in talk and non-verbal language.

Some points to consider

How were the children's feelings about the dark used to enhance their learning?

What evidence is there that this approach was effective?

What other approaches could you use to continue to encourage children to express their needs, thoughts and feelings?

How could parents be further involved?

Observant staff can pick up on areas of need.

Involving parents and explaining aims will help children to learn.

Providing positive role models is an effective method of encouraging children's interest.

Children were encouraged to pay attention, respond to stories and develop the ability to handle books.

Examples from practice

On looking at the balance of activities over the day, the adults realised that the children, especially the very young boys, were not taking opportunities to listen to stories.

The centre had a 'Boys and Books Week' when dads and grandpas were invited and encouraged to read from story books before taking their children home.

Staff took the time to explain to parents and carers the importance of children seeing men reading and enjoying books. Staff were particularly sensitive to children who came from a one-adult household.

The young boys continually returned to the books on their own, revisiting the stories that had been read to them.

Some points to consider

How would you have responded to this situation?

What other activities might involve parents/carers in helping children to enjoy books?

How would you maintain the interest of the boys in books and stories?

What might the next steps be to further encourage an interest in books and reading?

Knowledge and understanding of the world

Children's developing knowledge and understanding of the world is linked closely with other aspects of their learning.

From their earliest days, children try to make sense of their world. Their natural curiosity drives them to explore and understand their environment using their senses, and at times to wonder at its beauty and scale. They investigate their environment in a variety of ways: by observing shapes, colours, patterns and sequences of events in their surroundings; by asking questions; by matching, sorting and counting, comparing and learning to name and categorise; by listening and tasting and smelling; by touching and handling and exploring; by recording in pictures and models; by experimenting and investigating, designing and making and guessing and experimenting; by role playing and problem solving.

All of this active involvement by the child leads to a growing range of skills in investigating. It also broadens children's knowledge of people and places in their community. By visiting other places in the locality and observing and talking about the routines and jobs of people that they meet in the nursery and the community, they will extend their experience of home and family. Through television, computers and travel they may experience a wider environment and become aware of some differences in other times and places.

They will also develop interests in their natural surroundings, including familiar animals and plants. They readily become involved in the care of plants and pets, and should have opportunities to explore and recognise features of living things. They delight in their own rapid growth and the changes that it brings to their capabilities. They increasingly become aware of the passing of time in their own daily routines and the changing patterns of weather and seasons. As they handle and use a variety of materials in their play, they learn about their properties and uses.

The children's environment is one in which technology is important in their everyday lives. As children use blocks, put on a warm jumper, look through a magnifying glass, clamber on to a climbing frame, use a computer or travel by train, they become aware of the everyday uses of technology in the home, in transport, in communication and in leisure.

They should also become aware of their own health and safety at home in the centre and outside, and of some of the risks that they should avoid. Encouraging children to adopt healthy habits in diet, exercise and hygiene brings immediate and lasting benefits.

Through activities that involve sorting, matching, comparing, classifying, and making patterns and sequences, children, often in play contexts, will develop their mathematical knowledge of number, measurement and shape.

They should have opportunities to use and understand mathematical language such as 'heavier', 'bigger than' or 'square', and to identify and use numbers in counting games, songs, rhymes and during play experiences. Some will become familiar with some larger numbers such as house or bus numbers from their own environment. They should use their growing understanding of mathematics to solve simple practical problems.

In developing their knowledge and understanding of the world children should learn to:

- develop their powers of observation using their senses
- recognise objects by sight, sound, touch, smell and taste
- ask questions, experiment, design and make, and solve problems
- recognise patterns, shapes and colours in the world around them
- sort and categorise things into groups
- understand some properties of materials, for example soft/hard, smooth/rough
- understand the routines and jobs of familiar people
- become familiar with the early years setting and places in the local area
- become aware of everyday uses of technology and use these appropriately (scissors, waterproof clothing, fridge, bicycle)
- be aware of daily time sequences and words to describe/measure time, for example snack-time, morning, first, next, clock
- be aware of change and its effects on them, for example their own growth, changes in weather, trees, flowers
- care for living things, for example plants, pets at home
- be aware of feeling good and of the importance of hygiene, diet, exercise and personal safety
- develop an appreciation of natural beauty and a sense of wonder about the world
- understand and use mathematical processes such as matching, sorting, grouping, counting and measuring
- apply these processes in solving mathematical problems
- identify and use numbers up to ten during play experiences and counting games
- recognise familiar shapes during play activities
- use mathematical language appropriate to the learning situations.

Helping the youngest children develop their knowledge and understanding of the world needs special consideration. For them, the world is only what they experience, they have little understanding of other points of view. Nevertheless, the way that they see the wider world is often fresh and vivid. In planning activities in this key aspect adults need to locate them firmly in play contexts that are real and meaningful to children. Familiar daily routines such as counting the number of jugs to fill the water tray or setting up the correct number of places at the snack table can also provide contexts for the development of understanding in this key aspect. The adult's role in supporting children as they develop their curiosities is to provide an interesting range of learning opportunities and to ensure an appropriate level of support and reassurance for children.

Children use similarities and differences to name, sort and categorise objects. This helps them to organise their thoughts.

Learning about the world provides good opportunities to introduce children to information books.

Learning experiences spread over a series of days help to sustain interest and to develop continuity in learning.

Examples from practice

As part of a seasonal theme, a member of staff brought a selection of bulbs for planting indoors and outdoors. A book was prepared on how to plant a bulb.

Bulbs were laid out on the table and the children were encouraged to look at, touch and smell them. After discussing the different types of bulbs, and with help from the adult, the children sorted out different categories by identifying properties of size, shape and colour. The adult and the children used pictures to help them to identify and label the bulbs. The adult had prepared a book on how to plant a bulb that consisted mainly of pictures with a few words of instruction. Together they looked at the book and progressed through each step of planting the bulb.

Two children became very interested in the bulbs. They began to take them out of the dark cupboard every day to see if they needed water. The bulbs were taken out of the cupboard when they had grown sufficiently. The children were taken to the local park when the spring bulbs were in bloom. They discussed the beauty of the park and ways that they could take care of it so that everyone could enjoy it.

Children learn to sort and match using familiar, interesting contexts. Counting animals of each type gives them practice in instantly recognising a number of objects however they are arranged.

Lots of practical experience gives children confidence with number, which helps them when they move to ideas such as 'one more' or 'one less' and to written representations of number.

Examples from practice

A nursery nurse had set out plastic animals (four lions, three tigers and two monkeys) on the interest table following a previous discussion with a group of children who had expressed an interest in 'wild animals'. She encouraged the children to match and count the number of animals.

She extended this activity by introducing small sets of toy elephants, giraffes and bears. She discussed the names of these animals then asked the children to match and count them. She increased the size of sets for two children who were responding confidently. The children were then asked to lay out a set of their favourite animals, and to ask each other how many were in the set.

Examples from practice

A playgroup had been helping the children to learn about different people who worked in the village. The postie had arrived with mail and the parents had asked her to come and talk to the children. The children asked where she had come from that morning and how some of the letters travelled so far. Discussions took place about how her job changed in different weathers.

Books and pictures were provided and dressing-up clothes including hats and bags were put out for role play. Letter- and card-writing material for the children to use was made available. Parents took them to visit the village post office and buy stamps, paper, envelopes and postcards. A post office was set up in the play-room where the children had opportunities to write their own messages and send them to each other.

Some points to consider

Which aspects of knowledge and understanding of the world could be developed from this experience?

What opportunities does this offer to develop aspects of communication and language? Which aspects would you focus on?

How might you develop the post office further?

Examples from practice

A group of children was building with large wooden blocks. One child announced that she was building a house (there were new houses near to the nursery and some children had been taken to look at the patterns of the bricks). Another asked where the door was, 'because you need a door to get inside'. Someone else laughed and said, 'It's only two bricks high, you are too tall to fit inside!'

The group decided they would build a house big enough for one of them to fit into and the teacher wondered how many layers of brick they would need. Three children stood next to the wall and they all agreed on the smallest child, Joanne. She stood beside the house so that the children could see how near they were getting. After a bit she became restless and then someone said, 'We could use the rods instead.' Two children solved the problem by joining some rods from a construction kit together until they were about the same height as Joanne. They propped up the rods beside the house so that everyone could join in the building.

Some points to consider

What mathematical language would you introduce/practise with this group?

What play activities might extend these children's interest in height or other aspects of measurement?

Practical experience gives children confidence to experiment and discover things themselves.

Hands-on experience can help to sustain interest and encourage children to try out ideas for themselves. Children can gain an understanding of sequencing and reapply this process through play.

Children can begin to understand the properties of materials.

Children are developing increasing control of fine movements of fingers and hands (Physical development and movement).

Younger children learn through playing alongside others and need opportunities to repeat and practise new skills.

Learning can develop in different directions – planning is needed to enable this to happen.

Examples from practice

The children at nursery had been planting sunflower seeds.

Staff observed one three-year-old girl who had just helped to transplant some seedlings. She went immediately to the sand tray and 'planted' a seed, going through the whole procedure carefully and with concentration.

Several children joined her at the sand tray and began to play alongside each other. A three-year-old boy began to fill a small container, silently piling the sand higher and higher. Another four-year-old began digging a hole, scooping out the sand and scraping his trowel along the bottom of the tray.

'I'm digging a deep hole', he said, inviting the other two children to join in. They looked up to watch what he was doing and then continued silently with their own activities.

Staff discussed their observations at the end of the session. They decided to provide several plant pots of varying sizes and additional digging and planting equipment. They agreed that they would continue to observe the play at the sand tray closely. In particular, they decided they would focus on the play of the younger children to determine whether they were having any difficulty in joining in or whether they were simply enjoying playing alongside others.

Some points to consider

How would you respond to this situation?

Which aspects of knowledge and understanding of the world could be further developed from this starting point?

How would you continue to ensure that you were meeting the needs of all the children whilst developing the play further?

Using different ingredients, mixing and kneading allows children to begin to understand properties of materials.

Real experience helps children to become confident with number and introduces them to mathematical concepts and language.

Children calculate, estimate and predict in order to solve simple practical problems.

Children's interest can be sustained over a period of time.

Children become aware of time, methods of measuring time and words that describe time.

Examples from practice

A baking activity was provided at the playgroup for small groups of three-year-olds to make bread.

A member of staff asked each child to select a mixing bowl and spoon, and together the children and adult looked at the recipe card. The children were asked to count out the number of cups of bread mix, followed by the correct number of spoonfuls of water.

The recipe required that the children knead their dough for a short while, followed by letting the dough rest. The children were encouraged to make their dough into rolls, so that they would have enough for their snack and also be able to take some home for the members of their family. This involved children calculating, dividing the dough and estimating equal portions. The rolls then had to be left to rise, which interested the children as they checked to see when their dough had become bigger.

The children set the timer to time the 20 minutes their rolls would take to cook, and checked on progress half-way through as the recipe suggested. When the children were ready to eat their rolls, they set their own place at the snack table.

Some points to consider

What mathematical language would you introduce to the children?

How were the children supported to develop their mathematical knowledge of number, measurement and time?

What further opportunities does this activity offer to develop other key aspects of development and learning?

Expressive and aesthetic development

Children's expressive and aesthetic development is linked closely with other aspects of their learning.

Expressing and creating ideas, feelings and imagination as well as having opportunities to enjoy all manner of sounds, sights, shapes and textures are vital parts of the young child's development.

They contribute to their confidence and self-esteem, and add colour and richness to life.

They contribute to children's learning about themselves and the world, and to the development of social, intellectual, physical and communication skills. In developing expressive and aesthetic experiences the emphasis should be on the enjoyment, expression and learning that takes place during the experience rather than on finished products.

The early years setting should be a place where all of the children's senses are engaged and stimulated. It should be an environment where children's creations contribute to displays and decoration. In designing and making, opportunities should be provided for children to investigate and use a variety of materials and techniques, and to explore line, shape, form, colour, tone, pattern and texture in two and three dimensions. They should be encouraged to use pictures, paintings and constructions to create their personal view in response to what they see and experience.

Children readily enter different worlds in role play, movement, dance and drama, when they recreate and invent situations at home, in the wider community and in their imaginations. They will use movements, gestures and facial expression alongside spoken language as they become absorbed in role play. Staff should appreciate the value to children's personal and social development of acting out and exploring situations together. At times, they should intervene where role play is observed to need support from a member of staff by joining in the role play or by suggesting a new context or situation or by the addition of a resource.

Children should have opportunities to enjoy music in all its forms, participating in playing instruments, singing, moving rhythmically and expressively to music, creating their own music and listening to music. Regular opportunities should be provided for them to listen to sounds, rhythms, nursery rhymes and a wide variety of music, and respond through movement, singing, clapping and creating their own music using percussion instruments and everyday objects.

In expressive and aesthetic development children should learn to:

- investigate and use a variety of media and techniques such as painting, drawing, printing and modelling with fabrics, clay and other materials
- express thoughts and feelings in pictures, paintings and models
- use role play or puppets to recreate and invent situations
- use verbal and non-verbal language in role play
- listen and respond to sounds, rhythms, songs and a variety of music
- make music by singing, clapping and playing percussion instruments
- use instruments by themselves and in groups to invent music that expresses their thoughts and feelings
- move rhythmically and expressively to music
- participate in simple dances and singing games.

Helping younger children find ways into expressive and aesthetic experiences requires adults to consider their developmental needs and the responses they make to new materials and activities.

When very young children first encounter new situations and activities they often need time to simply watch and observe before they feel ready to join in. This careful and often totally absorbed watching can be an important stage in learning how to cope with something new and exciting. It also helps give children the necessary degree of self-assurance before they become involved as participants.

Adults need, therefore, to be sensitive to this and to the child's general state of readiness and willingness to be part of an activity or to try out new materials. Ensuring that ample time is made for these preliminary stages is of great importance.

Once the child has become personally committed and involved, adults need to provide opportunities to explore the potential of the new materials or activities in different ways, whether it be, for example, paint or clay or musical instruments. Although these activities can often be messy and noisy, they are an important part of the learning process.

Learning can develop in different directions. Planning should allow this to happen.

The use of dressing-up clothes and props can extend the possibilities of role play for children.

A variety of other expressive and aesthetic experiences resulted from this experience.

Parents can provide access to experience in the local community. Their organisational skills can be valuable in allowing staff to extend learning beyond the centre.

Examples from practice

Four children were observed making a 'stage' with large blocks and playing at being dancers.

Some children continued to build bigger and better stages to use during role play. Others were provided with dressing-up clothes, skirts and waistcoats, and an adult read and discussed some books about dancing with them. A group of children were taken to the library to find more books. Music was played on the cassette recorder for the children to listen and dance to. Several other children began to get involved, either as watchers or as dancers. Some colourful fabrics were provided and children began to use them as scarves to move about when they were dancing. Music with different paces and moods was played for children to respond to in their dancing.

A parent who taught a local dancing class was invited to come in to the nursery and show the children some dance steps. Children looked at photographs of a dance display and talked about the costumes. They were invited with their parents to watch a dancing class. Some parents organised a visit for all the children and accompanied them. The children had a very enjoyable and informative session watching and talking to the dancers.

The visit continued the interest in dance and the nursery staff planned over the ensuing weeks to introduce music and dance from a variety of cultures.

Examples from practice

A group of children was admiring a display of spring flowers that had been set up so that they could look at the flowers and smell them.

The children and adult talked about the colours and shapes of the flowers and touched them gently and held them against their faces. The children were excited when they were asked if they would like to try to arrange their own bowl of flowers.

In small groups they set out their collection of flowers and began to try out arrangements. They talked about whether large flowers should go at the back or at the sides and whether the same colour of flowers should go together. A lot of time was spent looking at the flowers closely and some children were starting to use the names of the flowers in conversation. A ladybird was found on one set of flowers and was carefully taken outside.

The children decided on their arrangements. They were gathered together and everyone talked about what they liked about each arrangement. The arrangements were carefully set out on a table in the entrance and a caption was made up together and written for parents.

The next day pictures and paintings of flowers surrounded the children's display. They talked about the pictures and many of them wanted to paint flowers. Their paintings were bright and expressive.

Some points to consider

Which aspects of learning were developed here?

How might you record children's responses during this activity?

What did this add to the experience?

Why was painting left to the end of this activity? Why do you think the children's paintings were 'expressive'?

Children were encouraged to express their ideas and feelings and to use their imaginations . . . sensitive adult interaction helped the children to explore their responses.

Children were developing their skills of observation and using their senses (Knowledge and understanding of the world).

An opportunity was provided for children to investigate and explore with a variety of objects.

Children were encouraged to listen to other children and to use language to express their feelings (Communication and language).

Examples from practice

A collection of beautiful and interesting items were hidden in a basket full of straw and placed in an enclosed and cosy area of the nursery. Children came and went as they pleased. They examined each item as it was discovered. The adult supported the children's explorations and discoveries by discussing each item with them. The children were encouraged to discuss the texture, shape and colour of each item.

In the basket there were containers – jewellery boxes, small silver containers, large boxes made of wood. There were marble eggs, a brass rocking horse, a silver dolphin. The children were encouraged to explore as many items as possible.

It was observed, however, that some children chose a favourite item and tended to stick with it. One boy in particular chose a lilac-coloured marble egg and held it closely to his face and mouth, feeling its cold, smooth surface. He looked in a large mirror to see himself and sat for a long time, gazing, holding the egg to his cheek.

As the session came to an end, the children placed the items back in the basket, packing some of them carefully inside the containers. One child was observed placing his own valuable toy, brought from home, alongside the other items in the basket.

Some points to consider

How might you record children's responses?

How would you build on what was observed?

How might you further the children's learning by following their interest in particular objects?

How would you allow this activity to lead to other aspects of development and learning?

Physical development and movement

Children's physical development and movement is linked closely to other aspects of their learning.

The early years are a time of rapid physical and mental development as young children learn to control and use their bodies and become aware of what they can do and what it is possible to do. These are exciting times for children as they grow and change in shape and size.

Children's physical development is influenced by their growing confidence and enjoyment of physical play, by their increasing ability to control their own bodies through movement and by their physical well-being and strength. As children develop, they become faster, stronger, more mobile and more sure of their balance, and they start to use these skills in a wider range of physical activities. As they develop physically children also begin to become aware of themselves as individuals. This developing sense of identity is linked closely to their own self image, self-esteem and confidence.

Through opportunities for physical play, children become steadily better at those skills requiring co-ordination of different parts of the body, for example hands and eyes for throwing and catching, legs and arms for skipping with a rope. They become aware that they can use their bodies to express ideas and feelings by moving in different ways as they respond to their moods and feelings or to music or imaginative ideas. As they do these things, children explore what their bodies can do and become aware of their increasing abilities. They also become aware of physical play as both an individual and a social activity: in playing alone or alongside others, in playing with a partner in throwing and catching, in using a seesaw or push cart, or in joining a game with a larger group. Physical activities can provide opportunities to promote social skills such as sharing, turn-taking, co-operating and negotiating, and encourage the development of values such as honesty, fairness and respect for others.

Energetic play that involves running, jumping and skipping helps children to develop balance and co-ordination as well as an appreciation of distance and speed. Children's awareness of the space around them and what their bodies are capable of can be extended by climbing and balancing on large-scale apparatus such as a climbing frame, wooden logs and a balancing bar and by using small tricycles, bicycles and carts. Within these contexts children should be encouraged to seek personal challenges that encourage a degree of risk taking but which are set within a safe and supportive environment.

Opportunities for physical activity should be provided both inside and out. Regular sessions of physical play indoors or visits to local sports or leisure centres are particularly important when the weather limits opportunities for outdoor play. The outdoors can provide a scale and freedom for a type of play that is difficult to replicate indoors, for example opportunities to dig a garden, explore woodland, run on the grass, roll down a grassy slope or pedal a car across a hard surface. Visits to swimming pools, where these can be arranged, can help children to enjoy and gain confidence in the water at an early stage.

In order to develop their fine motor skills, children should have opportunities to handle scissors, pencils, brushes and crayons. They should work with construction materials, jigsaws and other small apparatus to improve hand–eye co-ordination and hand control. By working with food, fabrics, wood, clay and other natural and manufactured substances, children’s skills in using different materials and a range of tools can be extended and they will develop increasing control of the fine movements of their fingers and hands.

Children should be increasingly involved in developing the skills required to take care of their own bodies, for example washing and dressing themselves, cleaning their teeth and becoming more independent at mealtimes. They should be encouraged to feel good about their growing range of physical skills and to enjoy the feeling of well-being that good health and physical play bring. They should be helped to understand safe practices when using small apparatus or tools such as a hammer, saw and scissors.

In physical development and movement children should learn to:

- enjoy energetic activity both indoors and out and the feeling of well being that it brings
- explore different ways in which they can use their bodies in physical activity
- use their bodies to express ideas and feelings in response to music and imaginative ideas
- run, jump, skip, climb, balance, throw and catch with increasing skill and confidence
- co-operate with others in physical play and games
- develop increasing control of the fine movements of their fingers and hands
- develop an awareness of space
- be safe in movement and in using tools and equipment
- be aware of the importance of health and fitness.

Younger children have particular characteristics in relation to physical development and movement that require adults to consider how best to ensure these are properly addressed. Adults can support this key aspect by planning learning opportunities that allow children to practise both fine and large body movements and by being enthusiastic participants in exercises and games. Simple movements involving stepping up, jumping and hopping provide valuable opportunities for the development of the co-ordinated use of large muscle groups. In the same way, making time to fasten buttons, pour water, hang up coats and put on clothes is important in helping to develop finer co-ordinated movement.

The energy levels of the youngest children are very variable. One moment they will be very active and boisterous, the next tired and in need of rest. It follows that adults must be sensitive to these changes in energy levels and ensure there are places and opportunities for quiet and rest as well as planned occasions for energetic activity.

Apparatus was set out to provide opportunities to develop specific skills.

The task was modified because of staff observation of this child's particular needs.

Practising in this way develops skill and confidence.

Record keeping is a valuable means of tracing significant signposts of children's progress over time.

Examples from practice

Climbing equipment had been set out in the outdoor area to develop children's skills in climbing and balancing. A ladder and some planks had been positioned leading from the frame to make balancing easy or more challenging.

Peter, who had mobility difficulties, was observed trying to get on to one of the low planks. He was unable to do this as the plank was too narrow to allow him to keep his balance.

The adult replaced the low plank with a chute, which was much wider. This gave him more confidence and he repeatedly used the chute, persevering in a way that was unusual for him.

Over the next few weeks he used a variety of equipment to develop balance, such as stepping stones and low benches for walking along. Some five months later, the adult's record noted 'Peter was excited because he could now walk unaided along a narrow plank joining two "A-frames"'.

Examples from practice

A new child arrived at the playgroup. Watching another child hammering a nail into a piece of wood at the woodwork bench, she attempted to copy what she had seen but her grip on the hammer was not suitable.

The leader gathered all ten children together to teach them how to hold and use the hammer safely and properly. The adult took the opportunity to talk to the children about the use of other equipment in the woodwork corner and demonstrated the use of the saw, the vice and the hammer and nails. The children were also shown how to put the tools away after use. During the next few days the child's interest continued and she made a large wooden aeroplane. During this time she was observed and given further help by a parent helper. Her parents were encouraged to let her use tools at home.

Some points to consider

Why was it important to gather all the children together here?

How could this lead to other aspects of development and learning?

In what other ways could this new child be helped to settle in?

Activities need to be planned that enable children to enjoy activities both indoors and out.

Children developed an awareness of space and explored different routes for the wheeled toys.

Children were able to solve problems and co-operate with each other to arrive at solutions.

Fine movements of fingers and hands were needed to produce the result the children desired.

Children were able to record their discoveries in a meaningful way.

Examples from practice

The nursery had recently been out for a walk, during which the children had noticed and become very interested in road works that had changed the traffic flow.

Later, a group of three-year-olds were observed using wheeled toys, being 'organised' by one child using a one-way system.

Staff followed the interest up by taking the children back to look more closely at the new one-way system, talking about why it was there, looking at the holes made for new water pipes and introducing new vocabulary. One child asked what would happen if you 'went down the up road'.

On returning to the nursery, the road play-mat came out and the children tried out different routes. The one-way system in the outdoor play area was further developed by the children. Over the next few days the idea emerged that the children should draw their own map showing the route to nursery and the one-way system. Staff provided pens, paints and collage materials. Children were encouraged to look at maps, photographs and plans.

Some points to consider

How did the adults build on what was observed?

How did this lead to other aspects of development and learning?

How did the various resources provided encourage the development of specific skills?

Children were encouraged to move in a variety of ways to express their feelings.

What began as a way of using movement as a medium for expression also led to children working co-operatively with one another and joining in (Emotional, personal and social development).

Children listened and responded to a variety of music and sounds (Expressive and aesthetic development) and gained confidence in the use of musical instruments.

Children enjoyed energetic activity and a feeling of well-being.

Examples from practice

A large space was prepared by the adult so that the children could move freely. A variety of percussion instruments and a selection of taped music was provided.

The adult played a tape of Scottish Country Dance music and began to dance. Soon, children began to join in, skipping and jumping. They practised and explored different ways of moving – running, twirling, waving their arms.

The adult added long, satin ribbons to stimulate ideas for movement. The children used the ribbons to fly, swirl, fold, fall and trail on the floor.

Some children preferred to watch those dancing, and some chose a percussion instrument to play. Large pieces of brightly coloured material also encouraged further exploration by the children. Some made flags or cloaks, others made leads to 'walk the dog'.

After a while, some children took their material, lay down and wrapped themselves up in it. The adult played some soft, soothing music and the children lay listening and relaxing.

Some points to consider

How did this activity allow the children to develop skills and confidence?

What next steps would you take to continue to promote creative ideas in movement?

Why was it important to use a variety of props and stimuli?