

Promoting effective learning

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The roles and responsibilities of adults in organising for children's learning

The starting point for learning is the child. Children's previous experiences and achievements, their needs and interests, and the individual ways in which they learn are important factors in their progress in each of the key aspects. Adults have a vital role to play in supporting children's learning. In planning for children's learning adults should consider both the needs and achievements of the child and the range of learning experiences that will help children to progress in different aspects of their learning and development.

Every adult working in an early years setting is part of a team. In order that the team plan and organise effectively it is necessary for all those involved to understand different developmental stages and to work together with shared approaches, attitudes and expectations.

To promote effective learning in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect adults need to be consistent and realistic in their expectations and their responses to children. Developing warm, supportive relationships with children and other adults creates a climate in which children feel confident to tackle new challenges and where children can see mistakes as part of the learning process. For younger children familiar daily routines such as 'welcoming' and 'farewell' help to foster a sense of belonging and develop the social awareness so vital to successful learning.

Many play opportunities should be freely chosen by the children from a broad range of activities and experiences. This allows them to develop interests, to try out different ways of learning and to explore materials and relationships. Adults need to be sensitive to ways in which they extend children's learning through play. Intervention by adults should support or extend the learning experience, increase its level of challenge or channel children's interests into a broader or more balanced set of learning experiences.

In addition to interaction during some play experiences adults should use regular short periods of time to develop particular aspects of learning with small groups and individual children. This allows adults to stimulate interests, to teach and develop skills and to revisit and extend previous learning.

In planning the overall programme adults should take account of different stages of development and ensure a balance between group and individual activities. There should also be time to be quiet and rest.

In planning for learning it is important to take account of the physical environment. The space available needs to be carefully organised to allow for a range of different activities. Where possible the outdoor and indoor areas, including the surrounding neighbourhood, should be used as resources for learning.

Children should have easy access to resources that encourage them to be independent in their learning.

Just as children will vary in the achievements they bring to the setting, they will also develop and make progress at their own pace. Adults need to take account of this in matching learning activities and experiences to the needs of the child. To do so involves effective assessment.

The assessment process

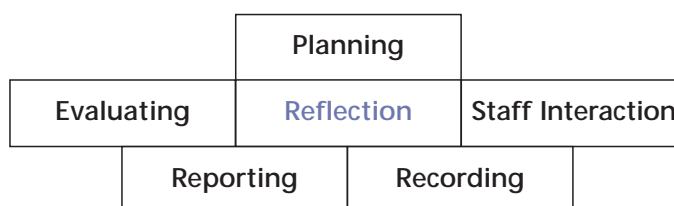
Assessment should be an integral part of the daily routine in an early years setting. It occurs as adults listen, watch and interact with a child or group of children. Wherever possible staff should find ways of involving children in the process.

The purpose of assessment is to provide useful information about children's learning and development that can be shared with other staff, parents and the child, and which will be helpful in informing future planning.

Although each aspect is described separately in the text, each aspect is interrelated in the assessment process. For example:

- setting goals for learning (planning) will highlight aspects for observation and assessment during play
- record keeping will gather the information needed for effective reporting
- evaluation of learning and teaching will influence future plans.

This interrelationship is illustrated in the diagram below. It shows the common assessment process that informs decision making about learning and teaching in both early years settings and primary schools.



Reflection

Reflecting on practice is at the heart of the assessment process. Taking time to step back and to reflect on what has been successful in children's learning and what might have been planned differently enables staff to make changes that promote more effective learning.

Reflection should be an integral part of planning, observation, recording and reporting, and will be most effective when staff take time to share and shape their perceptions with other colleagues.

Planning

Effective planning establishes clear goals for learning that are designed to match the needs and achievements of children. Planning, whether long or short term should leave staff clear, confident and well-prepared for what they are trying to achieve in children's learning. Sharing this information with children and parents will assist the learning partnership.

The descriptions of key aspects of children's learning in this guideline should help the process of planning a broad and balanced curriculum. The descriptions should also be useful in setting long- and short-term learning goals for individuals and small groups of children based on assessment information. Although staff should plan a broad set of learning opportunities throughout the year, there may be times when there is particular emphasis on aspects of the curriculum, for example on music making and dance, or investigations of living things. Alternatively, a set of learning experiences may be clustered around seasonal or other themes, or local events, festivals or outings. Long-term planning provides a picture of how these are providing children with a broad and balanced range of learning experiences over a period.

Short-term planning allows observations and assessments of children's development and learning to shape the weekly or daily programme. In setting out a range of learning opportunities, plans therefore need to take account of what individual children and small groups of children have recently learned and of their current needs and interests.

Planning should also be flexible so that it can take account of children's ideas and responses to learning experiences and allow learning to develop spontaneously. When there has been a need to alter a plan, future plans should be reviewed and adjusted to ensure that a broad and balanced range of learning continues to be provided or that goals for learning are revised. In this way the learning opportunities provided should be influenced by and responsive to children's interests within an overall long-term plan.

Observation and assessment during staff interaction

It is from observation and assessment of children at play that we learn how and what they learn. Yet it is not possible to observe everything where large numbers of children are involved in a range of play. This means that observation and assessment should be focused and selective. For example, at different times observation and assessment might be focused on:

- a particular goal for learning for an individual or small group of children that has been set out in planning
- all of the learning of an individual child for a short period
- the responses of children who choose a particular learning experience, for example a visit to the book corner.

To be of value, observation and assessment must influence the learning situation. As observation and assessment often take place during interactions with children at play, one use of assessment is to make staff realise where additional support or challenge is required for individuals or groups of children. In this case observation and assessment should lead to immediate action as a result of the observation. Much valuable information about children's learning is gained when staff also take time to observe children when they are playing without adult support.

Sometimes assessment evidence may lead to a brief note that will be followed up in later reflection or discussion with other staff. Evaluation of the observations can be used in planning, for example to practise a skill or offer a new learning experience or to direct staff support for the following day or week. Observation is useful in helping staff to evaluate the effectiveness of their provision and of their interactions during learning.

Recording

Day-to-day records of observations and assessments help staff to plan learning experiences that take account of children's needs and development. Records should also provide a profile of each child's progress in different aspects of their development and learning. Profiles will provide the information required to report to parents, colleagues and other professionals.

Record keeping should be kept manageable: too detailed record keeping takes time away from interacting with children in learning and teaching. It should concentrate on what is significant in children's learning rather than attempt to record everything that happens.

Staff in some centres use notebooks, diaries or checklists to record observations that are then used in making plans to develop children's learning. This recognises a link between planning and recording. Planning helps to focus what is recorded and the observations made during learning influence future planning, setting out the next steps in learning.

Such records can be used to build up a profile of each child's progress in learning. Alternatively, from time to time during the year staff may complete parts of a profile as a way of taking stock of children's progress. Profiles should include, for each of the key aspects of children's development and learning, brief comments on significant strengths and development needs observed during a child's learning. They can also include photographs and examples of children's work.

Reporting

Reporting is a means of promoting partnership with parents and of sharing information with children, colleagues and other professionals, and determining the next steps in learning. Some early years settings start a profile when a child is preparing to start the early years setting. Parents and children complete statements such as 'I can . . .' and 'I enjoy . . .' with pictures or photographs and statements. This involves children in recognising their capabilities and values the learning that they have already achieved.

Using opportunities for informal reporting to parents during day-to-day contacts and sending home examples of children's work will continue this process. Profiles can be developed by staff in the way described above. Children can be involved in self-assessment, for example by discussing photographs or examples of work that might be included in profiles. Information from parents about learning at home can also be included. Profiles will provide evidence for making oral and written reports to parents. This information can also be shared with primary schools and other professionals.

Evaluating

Reflecting on observations and assessment is an important part of staff development. It involves thinking about what has worked well in providing learning experiences and in interacting with children. It involves thinking about improvements that could have been made to help learning take place more effectively, for example by asking a question in a different way, providing a different resource, or challenging children more during an interaction. Evaluating aspects of children's learning over time will help in judging whether the learning experiences and interactions are helping them to make good progress. Discussing all of this with other staff will help in promoting children's learning effectively.

Promoting Learning: Assessing Children's Progress 3 to 5, published by and available from Scottish CCC, provides additional advice on Section 3 of these guidelines.