



## Children as individuals

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Each child is a unique individual. Each brings a different life story to the early years setting. Growing up as a member of a family and community with unique ways of understanding the world creates an individual pattern of learning and pace of development. It helps determine the child's views and attitudes.

In order to plan learning experiences that will meet each individual child's needs it is important to find out as much as possible about the child and to build on this by:

- working together with home and families
- taking account of special educational needs
- fostering equal opportunities
- collaborating with other agencies
- supporting transitions.

## Working together with home and families

Parents are children's prime educators in their earliest years and they continue to play a major role in their young child's learning when they enter the early years setting. Staff should value the role of parents in their children's learning and work to create a genuine partnership with them. When staff and parents work together to support children's learning, it can have significant positive effects on the way in which children value themselves and those around them.

The starting point for this partnership is the pre-entry visit to the early years setting. As well as welcoming and familiarising children and parents with the new setting, this provides an opportunity to involve parents and children in discussion about the child's achievements to date. Continued two-way communication is important to a successful partnership. Regular informal contacts as children are brought to the early years setting and collected are useful for exchanging information about children.

Displays of children's work and photographs with captions explaining the learning gained from activities and experiences will help to share the aims of education with parents. Clear and well-presented written communication in a prospectus or handbook and newsletters can keep parents up to date. Where possible these should be provided in the different languages used by parents.

Open days and meetings can provide a useful opportunity to discuss the curriculum with parents. An important focus of such meetings should be to reaffirm the contribution of parents to their children's learning and to suggest ways of supporting learning at home.

There are opportunities for informal reporting to parents during day-to-day contacts. It is good practice to provide oral reports to parents (for example after children have settled in and again towards the end of a year) and a written report on their progress and achievement.

Parents should be involved in settling children into the early years setting. The process is eased where parents are welcome to stay and play with the children until their child is confident with staff and other children. This also assists staff discussion with parents of how their child is settling into their new setting. Partnership can also be strengthened by encouraging parents to see themselves as active and valued members of the early years community, involved in day-to-day learning experiences, planning and participating in events and visits, organising social events and helping to raise funds for specific projects.

### Taking account of special educational needs

Special educational needs arise from difficulties in learning or barriers to learning. Many of the difficulties that young children experience are temporary and will be resolved as they develop and learn. Many of them will relate to specific aspects of learning such as speech or language development. Careful consideration should be given as to when advice and expertise is required from external agencies, particularly where support may be important to parents.

Where additional support is needed to help children to progress, careful observation and assessment will help in finding out the different ways in which the child learns successfully and in identifying particular needs. An individualised educational programme should be drawn up indicating a range of approaches that will build on the child's strengths as a learner and tackle barriers to learning. Additional support such as individual attention, teaching and special resources can be planned. There should be regular reviews of the child's progress when targets can be agreed for future action.

A very small proportion of children face difficulties that are long term, requiring more help than is usually available in most early years settings. Their progress will need to be kept under regular review by the early years setting and by other professionals and parents. Here, a Record of Needs may be opened for the child.

Useful advice on these matters can be found in the HMI report *Effective Provision for Special Educational Needs* (SOED, 1994). This report also recommends that the information given to parents includes a statement about the arrangements that have been made to provide for children with special educational needs.

If an early years setting makes provision for a child who has a Record of Needs, staff must be familiar with the relevant legislation and with requirements set out in the child's Record.

The needs of very able children are not specifically referred to in the relevant legislation. Giftedness, in itself, is not regarded as giving rise to special educational needs. However, careful planning and staff interaction should ensure that more able children are challenged appropriately.

## Fostering equal opportunities

It is important that children from the earliest stages are helped to recognise that there are many different ways of seeing and understanding the world. These different ways depend on a range of cultural, social and religious viewpoints. Children's self-image is enhanced when their cultural heritage, gender, beliefs and the lifestyles of their families are respected, acknowledged and used in the planning of educational experiences and activities.

Taking account of the interests and skills emerging from the diversity that children and their families bring to the early years setting enriches learning experiences. A multicultural approach to the curriculum in the early years setting can be particularly fostered by the attitudes and behaviours of the adults involved.

Activities that encourage cultural awareness can be integrated into various areas of play, especially in the use of music and books, in role play in the house, in preparing foods from different cultures and in celebrating religious and cultural festivals. The creation of a stimulating visual environment in which there are photographs, paintings, prints and textiles reflecting different cultural traditions can also do much to enhance the early years setting.

Girls and boys should be given opportunities to participate equally in the full range of learning experiences, playing with a wide variety of tools and equipment. Care should be taken that particular activities do not become associated with boys or girls. All children should be encouraged, for example, to play in the house and play with construction toys and woodwork tools.

Books, pictures, jigsaws, stories, rhymes and puzzles should be selected to show positive images of people of different races and cultures, and show girls, boys, men and women in a range of roles. Children may need to have their awareness of issues of equal treatment raised through discussion. Racist and sexist remarks and incidents, if they occur, should be dealt with positively and constructively.

Children with disability also have a right to equal access to the curriculum and an entitlement that their capabilities are fully developed. Where children with disability are attending the early years setting, care should be taken to ensure that there is suitable access to the building, resources and equipment and that staff and children recognise their capabilities.

## Collaborating with other agencies

A commitment to social inclusion is at the heart of current policy on early education and childcare. This is promoted through broadly based and integrated support for children and families, involving education, health and social services and based on the guiding principles of meeting the needs and best interests of the child and their family and ensuring that every child feels included.

Before admission and subsequently throughout the year other professionals may be involved formally or informally with the child and family. These professionals may include a paediatrician, an educational psychologist, a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist and learning support staff.

In working with other professionals an ethos of mutual trust and openness is essential as is respect for the range of skills and expertise that each contributes to a co-ordinated service for children and their families.

At the heart of inter-professional collaboration is the need for early identification and assessment, which can be used to develop an appropriate individual educational programme for each child.

## Supporting transitions

Transitions occur throughout early childhood. They occur at different times as a young child moves from home to an early years setting, from one early years setting to a different one and when a child moves from an early years setting to primary school. Some children may experience a wide range of transitions, even within a single day.

Changes can be stressful, but for three-year-olds who are beginning to gain experience outside the home they can be particularly upsetting.

The key to smooth transitions for children is effective communication between child, parents and staff and the creation of a positive and supportive climate for both the parent and the child. From home to early years setting communication needs to be two-way with staff informing parents about expectations but also listening carefully to parents' concerns and hopes for their children.

Each early years setting should have its own policy on 'settling in', which is shared with parents. The process may involve home visits, information evenings, and prior visits to the early years setting. However, the time taken for each child to settle in will depend on the needs of the individual. Some children will take longer than others, some may show signs of unsettled behaviour after appearing to settle in well and the need for a supportive adult must always be carefully considered.

As children get ready to start primary school they need time to talk about any fears and anxieties they might have. Adults play a vital role in listening sensitively and helping to prepare them for this exciting and positive change, which is an important part of growing up.

In Section 1 of this guideline it was stated that:

'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 school.' Good liaison with the receiving primary school is essential if continuity and progression in children's development and learning is to be achieved. Liaison about the curriculum helps to develop a shared understanding of continuity in learning between pre-school and primary education. The curriculum guidelines for 5–14 set out opportunities for developing knowledge and understanding, skills and attitudes in five curriculum areas. There are clear links between the curriculum discussed in this document for children in the year prior to compulsory schooling and the 5–14 programme.

The diagram on the page opposite shows some of the important areas of continuity and progression between the pre-school framework and the 5–14 curriculum. For example, children's achievements in communication and language should continue to be developed across the curriculum at the early stages of primary school but they will particularly inform planned learning opportunities in English language. Staff in both sectors should be aware of these links. Where staff are involved in the transition from pre-school to school, they should be aware of the curriculum guidelines for each of the sectors. Liaison is therefore important in the transfer of information about children's earlier experiences, including their strengths, difficulties and interests, so that primary school staff can plan for continued development and progression in learning. Meetings and pupil profiles built up over time in the pre-school setting can be valuable ways of achieving transfer of information. Primary staff have a responsibility to use this information in planning learning programmes that take account of children's prior learning and achievement.

An important purpose of liaison is to ensure a smooth and confident entry for children to primary school. Meetings for parents and visits to primary school help to familiarise children with their new school and its teachers and allow discussions between staff. Visits by primary teachers to pre-school settings allow them to meet and observe children in their familiar surroundings and to discuss their observations with staff.

Curriculum Framework 3–5	5–14 Curriculum Guidelines
Emotional, Personal and Social Development	Personal and Social Development Religious and Moral Education
Knowledge and understanding of the World	Environmental Studies Mathematics
Communication and Language	English Language
Expressive and Aesthetic Development	Expressive Arts
Physical Development and Movement	