

Active learning

A practical guide to how babies and young children learn

by Helen Moylett

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Foreword



Focusing on learning and teaching in the early years

Anyone with children's best interests at heart will agree upon the crucial importance of experiences over the earliest years. However, good intentions are not enough to champion young learners. During early childhood, genuinely helpful adult behaviour – 'teaching' – looks very different from the version that suits older children and the classroom environment.

Those adults, who make a real difference, are knowledgeable about child development and committed to a warm relationship with individual children and their

families. They are also confident to be led by young children's personal time frames and learning journeys. They pay close attention to the current interests of young girls and boys and their enthusiasm for further discoveries.

The authors of this informative series close the gap of meaning that can exist between familiar phrases and a full understanding of what the words mean in best early years practice. Helen Moylett brings alive the concept of babies, toddlers and young children as active learners. Examples and explanation support readers to notice how young children are keen to persist, when they can make genuine choices in a shared enterprise.

By Jennie Lindon, early years consultant

Introduction

About the series

This book is one of a series of three:

- Playing and exploring
- **Active learning**
- Creating and thinking critically.

The starting point for all three books is that babies and young children are already, from birth, creative and competent thinkers and learners – actively involved in their play and gathering information, ideas and knowledge to build their development and learning.

The youngest babies and children are able to use most of the same strategies that will support them as learners all their lives, such as imitating others, playing with things and finding patterns in their experience so they can predict what will happen. These books unpack how children learn and how adults can best support them in being and becoming learners for life.

Playing and exploring, active learning and creating and thinking critically are key characteristics of how children learn and have been linked in recent developmental psychology research to the concept of ‘self-regulation’. Self-regulation involves attitudes and dispositions for learning and an ability to be aware of one’s own thinking. It also includes managing feelings and behaviour. Self-regulation underpins learning across all areas, developing from birth and supporting lifelong learning (Bronson, 2000).

All babies and young children are different so there is no ‘one size fits all’ way to foster these characteristics of learning. Young children respond to, and join in with, experiences in different ways depending on a host of factors, including their temperament and the opportunities they have already had. However the essential message of this book, and the others in the series, is that children (and their families) are entitled to

practitioners who are open to learning from the children with whom they work and who:

- Provide emotional warmth and security
- Tune-in to each unique child by observing and interacting sensitively
- Use observation and knowledge of child development to assess where children are in their learning and plan for next steps and challenges.

All three books provide many illustrative case studies and examples of real-life encounters with children’s **active learning**, their **play and exploration** and their **creative and critical thinking**. All these examples demonstrate practitioners and children engaged together in supporting and extending children’s learning.



Introduction



Practitioners should find these examples useful in reflecting on their own practice and the early years framework with which they work. The books focus particularly on the English Birth to Five framework: the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), but the characteristics of effective early learning are not tied specifically to any one cultural frame of reference and we hope practitioners working with other frameworks will find the discussion of learning and the ways in which adults support it, transcends national boundaries.

The characteristics of children's development and learning were embedded in previous English frameworks and recognised in the commitments, which uphold the principles of the EYFS. The Tickell review (2011) of the EYFS drew on recent research and evidence from practitioners and academics across the early years sector in re-emphasising and highlighting those commitments as the **characteristics of effective learning** and they are an important part of the revised EYFS (2012).

As we look at the three characteristics and the underlying aspects of each one, it is important to remember that they are all interlinked. So imagine that the grid below is like a child's piece of weaving, where they have carefully woven individual strands one way and then another so that they are criss-crossing. This is how it should look and is, in reality, how all children develop and learn.

The three characteristics emphasise **how** babies and young children go about the business of learning, rather than simply focusing on **what** they learn.

How children develop and learn is about the way in which they grow as thinkers and learners and involves them developing learning dispositions such as: curiosity, persistence, concentration, motivation, confidence and excitement. It is about becoming an independent thinker and learner who is able to make decisions and choices and interpret their ideas and solve problems.

The characteristics of effective learning

Playing and exploring Engagement	Finding out and exploring	Playing with what they know	Being willing to 'have a go'
Active learning Motivation	Being involved and concentrating	Keeping on trying	Enjoying achieving what they set out to do
Creating and thinking critically Thinking	Having their own ideas	Making links	Choosing ways to do things

“

The starting point for all three books is that babies and young children are already, from birth, creative and competent thinkers and learners – actively involved in their play and gathering information, ideas and knowledge to build their development and learning.

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If children have all these internal ‘tools’ at their fingertips as well as a good dose of self-confidence, well-being and resilience then **what** they learn will be encountered in a much more meaningful and enjoyable way.

What children learn is about the actual content or knowledge, so, for example, in the EYFS in England this is the **prime** and **specific** areas of learning – although there are many crossovers, particularly between the content of Personal, Social and Emotional Development and the characteristics. All learning is underpinned by social and emotional development. Generally we can see the **what** of children’s learning, or the content, as being like the bricks of a building with the **how** children learn and their social and emotional development as the cement and foundations – without which everything would topple over. The rest of this book explains this in much more depth across the age range from babies to children in school.

Just as the characteristics are woven together, so the three books in this series link together.

For example, in Chapter 1, there is a shared case study about Jago as he plays with a box of balls. Each book looks at Jago’s experience and learning from the different perspectives of **active learning, playing and exploring** and **creating and thinking critically**.

Throughout all three books there are further case studies, observations, suggestions for supporting children’s language development, reflection points and recommended reading.

About this book

Active learning looks in depth at what is meant by active learning for babies and young children. It explores the developmental theory behind this and how it links to good practice. It unpicks each aspect of active learning in terms of what it means and how it can be observed and developed in practice.

Some of the key themes of this book are:

- Why and how children are motivated to learn
- How adults can support children’s active learning through being effective role models in positive relationships and enabling environments
- The importance of well-being, resilience and persistence in becoming a self-regulated lifelong learner
- The need for close observation in order to support children with time and space for deep involvement in learning.



Chapter 1: What does 'Active learning' mean?



Active learning is all about **motivation** and is a key characteristic of lifelong learning, closely associated with becoming a self-regulated learner. Self-regulation includes the ability to control one's emotions as well as one's cognitive or learning processes.

Martha Bronson (2003) defines cognitive self-regulation as '*the ability to control attention, to direct and monitor thinking and problem solving and to engage in independent learning activities*'. These abilities alongside the ability to understand and work with our emotions are critical for our lifelong learning.

An active learner, whether nine months or ninety-years-old, is not necessarily physically active and moving her body (although in the case of babies and young children this is very likely) but she is definitely participating mentally and emotionally and, above all, she has a real will to learn – a strong motivation to get involved. Being motivated to learn is not only important in early childhood but also a key indicator of success throughout life. The ways in which adults nurture, support and extend babies and young children's capacity for active learning are therefore crucial for those children's future well-being and achievement.

Theory into practice

Motivation has been described in many ways. Broadly speaking we can say that motivation is the **will to learn**, the driving force that makes us do something – the reason we commit ourselves to being involved in an activity, persist in carrying it out and possibly try again to succeed if our first attempts fail. In this book we are going to be exploring motivation as the central idea underpinning three important and interwoven strands of active learning:

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

Each of these strands has a chapter devoted to it where the strand is unpicked in more detail and effective early childhood practice is discussed. This chapter gives an overview of all three and looks at some of the theories which inform current thinking and practice about active learning.

Some big questions for early years practitioners are:

- Where does motivation come from?
- How can we best support and extend it?

Sources of motivation to learn

Over the years a number of theories have been advanced as to how children learn. Many of them continue to influence our thinking about children and our practice in working with them. There are two main schools of thought embedded in the theories we are going to look at now – **social constructivism** and **behaviourism**.

Social constructivism tells us that children are born with the will to learn, beginning from birth to make sense of the world 'from the inside out' in interaction with others – here we say **motivation is intrinsic**. **Behaviourism** assumes that learning comes more from factors external to the child – 'from the outside in' – **motivation is extrinsic**.

So which way of looking at learning is right? The answer is both. Even though many early years academics and educators may

seem to frown on behaviourism, in fact most effective early years practice uses some elements of behaviourism alongside large amounts of social constructivism. Our current understanding, and the frameworks with which we work, continue to be informed by these ways of understanding children's learning. Let's look first at extrinsic motivation and behaviourism.

Extrinsic motivation

At its crudest, extrinsic motivation may be seen as **bribery**. For example: "If you put these balls away in the box, I'll give you a sticker." The child learns that the point of the activity is to please the adult and gain the reward, not to feel a sense of responsibility and gain the satisfaction of knowing that the balls are stored safely, ready for next time, or to find out that putting them away can be an enjoyable activity in itself.

This approach is linked to thinking about learning as merely a matter of conditioning the child to act in ways which the adults deem appropriate. Psychologists such as **Pavlov** and **Skinner** developed theories through their practical work and research on animals which have been universally applied to human beings and are often known as **behaviourism**. Pavlov's theory of **classical conditioning** can be seen in action in many situations where we do something in response to a stimulus. In schools, for example, when the bell rings children and staff tidy up and get ready for what they expect comes next – break, lunchtime, home time. If the bell rings at the wrong time they may still tidy – because the bell conditions their behaviour more strongly than their own awareness of time. Their actions are extrinsically motivated.

Skinner's theory of **operant conditioning** takes these ideas further with **positive and negative reinforcement**. If behaving in a certain way leads to a positive outcome, that behaviour will be repeated. Jess who is 14 months, for example, may throw a spider toy onto the floor from her highchair. She points to it and her father picks it up and makes it climb up the side of the highchair while he sings "Incey wincey spider is climbing up the highchair" Jess laughs, squealing excitedly when the spider reaches the tray. She throws it again, and again her father repeats the game. This routine is repeated several times. This is known as positive reinforcement – the reinforcer is the game.

Negative reinforcement is when the child behaves in a certain way to avoid something unpleasant. So, for example, Jess may soon stop wanting to play the toy throwing game