

Playing and exploring

A practical guide to how babies and young children learn

by Anni McTavish

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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.

Anni McTavish highlights the central importance of playful experiences for young children's learning. The detailed descriptions support readers to understand how the value of play rests upon respect for babies' and children's own purposes.

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 when 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 one, 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

Playing and exploring looks in depth at what is meant by playing and exploring for babies and young children. It considers the developmental theory behind play and how this links to good practice. Each aspect of playing and exploring is unpicked in terms of what it involves, how it can be observed and developed in practice. The book includes:

- Planning and creating a rich, well-resourced learning environment for playing and exploring.
- Why playing and exploring is important for babies and young children’s learning and development with examples to show best practice in action.
- Insight and ideas to support practitioners to follow children’s interests and extend learning through play and playful interactions.
- Involving parents in their children’s play and learning, and how you might improve practice in this area.



Chapter 1: What does 'playing and exploring' mean?



The characteristic **playing and exploring** has a fundamental role in children's learning. As they play and explore, babies and young children **engage** with their world, incorporating different strands of learning through their social, emotional, linguistic, physical and sensory development.

Playing and exploring emphasises a child's agency – their growing ability to make choices and decisions and have influence and impact on their environment and others. Through

play, children become aware of what they know and what they do that helps them to become successful learners. Together with active learning and creating and thinking critically, it is a key characteristic of lifelong learning.

The qualities that can be nurtured as children engage with their surroundings – imagination, persistence, flexibility and self-confidence, to name but a few, will be essential attributes for the future in our rapidly changing world.

Chapter 1: What does 'playing and exploring' mean?

The urge to play and explore is something we share with other mammals – this is particularly true of children and young mammals – we are born with the desire to discover, try-out, create and experiment. A baby begins to explore through their senses and bodily movements and in response to close, loving adults. As they develop mobility, those objects that are often closest to reach – spectacles, a necklace or a bunch of keys all provide fascinating play materials.

Babies, toddlers and children engage in playing and exploring in their own unique way. Play happens on a universal scale, but different cultures may interpret and value play differently (Brooker, p.27, 2010). As early years' practitioners, we need to continue to develop our skills of observation, so we are aware of the different ways children engage in the environment, and value the diverse themes that children can bring to their play.

Children will be learning in other ways too – including being directly taught how to do something, such as: baking biscuits; copying and imitating something they have seen;

gleaning information from books and stories; participating in an adult-led activity or joining-in a discussion about how something works. And, of course, not all play is rich in learning, particularly when it becomes repetitive or stuck-in a rut and there is not enough adult interaction and support to help it develop and move-on. It is important that we include opportunities for all these different routes to learning, and understand how the characteristic of playing and exploring is an essential tool that will contribute to best possible outcomes for babies, toddlers and young children. The characteristic of **playing and exploring** is divided into three strands:

- **Finding out and exploring**
- **Playing with what they know**
- **Being willing to 'have a go'.**

These are outlined below, with examples of what they might look like in practice.

Playing and exploring – engagement

Aspect of Playing and exploring	What this means	What this might look like
Finding out and exploring	<p>Babies and children show curiosity about objects, events and people.</p> <p>Use their senses to explore the world around them.</p> <p>Engage in open-ended activity.</p> <p>Show particular interests.</p>	<p>A baby touches a cup half-full with cold water. She moves her fingers inside to the surface of the liquid. Lifting them out, she puts her fingers in her mouth. Slowly she puts her fingers back into the cup and then plunges her hand in. Entranced, she discovers the water makes a 'sloshing' sound when she moves her hand up and down.</p>
Playing with what they know	<p>Children pretend objects are things from their own experience.</p> <p>Represent their experiences in play.</p> <p>Take on a role in their play.</p> <p>Act out experiences with other people.</p>	<p>Samir has recently been to his friend's birthday party. He makes a cake with the play-dough and decorates it with glitter and small pieces of straw for 'candles'. He sings Happy Birthday over and over again and blows his candles out.</p>
Being willing to 'have a go'	<p>Children initiate activities.</p> <p>Set and seek their own challenges.</p> <p>Show a 'can do' attitude.</p> <p>Willing to take a risk, engage in a new experience and learn by trial and error.</p>	<p>Joshua watches his older sister tie the laces on her new shoes.</p> <p>Each morning he pulls on his shoes and wraps and twists the laces round and round. He experiments with making a loop and threading the other lace through. He pulls, but both laces come undone. He tries again.</p>

(Reference: Development Matters 2012)