Practical Pre-School Books

Supporting the prime and specific areas of development

What does it mean to be four?

What every practitioner needs to understand about the development of four-year-olds

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Updated in accordance with the 2012 Early Years Foundation Stage

Contents

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Focus on four-year-olds

What does it mean to be four? explores the developmental needs and likely skills of four-year-olds. The approach and ideas of this book are relevant to practitioners who are working with fours anywhere in the UK. However, the structure of the book follows the statutory framework for England of the Birth to Five Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). This new edition of *What does it mean to be four?* has been updated following the revised framework that came into force from September 2012. The main EYFS documents can be accessed through the Department for Education website (details on page 52).

A learning journey across early childhood

In England, early years practitioners have been working within the EYFS since September 2008. The revised statutory framework and supporting guidance are much reduced in length and some details, like the early learning goals for the end of the stage, have been changed. Of course, everyone has to become familiar with the revised framework. Yet, early years provision with established best practice will not need to make sweeping changes to their approach to children and families. The crucial elements of best practice have not changed.

One focus of change is that the six areas of learning from the first EYFS framework have become seven areas, divided into three **prime** and four **specific** areas. This framework is one way of considering the breadth of children's learning. Children do not, of course, learn in separate compartments; their learning crosses all the boundaries. The overall aim of identifying particular areas of learning remains to ensure that early years practitioners do not overlook important areas of development.

The rationale for identifying three **prime** areas of learning is that secure early development rests upon:

- Communication and language
- Physical development
- Personal, social and emotional development.

These three areas are identified as, 'particularly crucial for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn, form relationships and

Communication and language

Even young fours come across as confident individuals, ready to speak up within their familiar small community. Girls and boys have opinions to express and questions to ask. Sometimes they clearly show awareness of the needs of other children, sometimes even of adults. However, these chatty, social children have not sprung into existence as a consequence of passing their fourth birthday.

Communicative four-year-olds

With appropriate experiences from earlier childhood, four-year-olds should now be confident in their skills of spoken communication. Some children will be confident in more than one language, although possibly more at ease in their most familiar language. There has been increasing concern about the communication skills of some young children. Exploration of delays or unusual patterns of development may reveal the impact of undiagnosed hearing loss (or intermittent loss), learning disabilities that affect the development of communication and specific language disorders.

However, some fours with limited skills of oral communication do not live with a disability. Their potential ability has been blocked by very limited experience of friendly communication with familiar adults: the main source of learning for babies and young children. Children learn to talk, to listen and to enjoy the give-and-take of spontaneous conversation as the result of many relaxed, personal exchanges with communicative grown-ups. Children do not learn to talk from hours of watching television or DVDs or playing with battery operated toys that 'talk' at them. Nor do they learn to communicate freely from very structured, adult-led communication in groups.

By now four-year-olds should have a substantial vocabulary. It should be a significant project to note down all the words that an individual child uses and understands, and a decent

PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS: IT'S NOT OBVIOUS

As adults we have lived with a wide range of abstract ideas for many years. Mathematical ideas of number, shape, size, weight or speed may seem 'obvious' to us. However, we spent many years learning this knowledge and we need to tune into the current thinking of a four-year-old, for whom some of these ideas are far from obvious, especially in a more abstract context.

You can share your best practice in conversations with parents focused on what their daughter or son has learned this week. Highlights from their child's day can support parents to envisage what is puzzling their child about the business of counting, for instance that you stop saying numbers when you have finger pointed to all the items.

Four-year-olds build up a considerable amount of mathematical knowledge through everyday routines and games that use numbers.

Some families will already involve their children in shopping or laying the table, and play board or simple card games with them. However, parents may underestimate the value of what they are doing – especially if they believe maths is done by 'experts' in early years provision or primary school.

LOOKING CLOSELY AT FOURS

In Buckingham's Nursery I listened to a great deal of spontaneous discussion between three children who wanted to make a pretend Halloween cake with the sand. They considered their amounts, with a lot of chat around "that's enough" or "we need some more", and deciding on the appropriate containers.

A different discussion about 'enough', 'full' and 'empty' arose from the children's enthusiasm for watering the garden. The large water butt in their garden was not an endless source of water. So the children experienced that even a container this large was to be empty eventually and stayed that way until someone refilled it from the hose.

The watering cans hung on hooks fixed to the fence and this provided a regular experience for children of one-to-one correspondence because they were encouraged to tidy cans back onto the hooks.

children who are motivated to form numbers for their own practical purposes. As with letters, it is very likely that fours will not be fully accurate and that, like their letters, they may write some numbers backwards. It is worth noting that there is still no expectation, in the early learning goals to the revised EYFS, that fives will be able to write numbers. The focus of understanding is all about recognition of written numbers in a practical context. In contrast, as discussed in the section on literacy, fives are expected as a whole age group to have a developmentally unrealistic level of skill in writing letters.

Interest in size and shape

A considerable amount of early mathematical learning happens easily through the medium of play, for instance when children are enjoying resources like sand, water, piles of leaves or earth. You will hear young girls and boys spontaneously using their language to comment on or direct the play relating to position, fit, amount and size. A generous store of containers and other equipment provides fours with direct, hands-on exploration of all the early mathematical concepts that arise from filling, emptying, building and creating shapes with sand or earth.

With plenty of time for sustained play and friendly adult input, four-year-olds develop a broad vocabulary to talk about relative size and shape that make sense within their learning