

Planning for Effective Early Learning

Professional skills in developing a child-centred approach to planning

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Updated to reflect the 2012 EYFS

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Planning that matters for children

Across the UK, national frameworks for early years provision expect that practitioners should use their adult ability to be thoughtful, along with their greater knowledge than any young child can have accumulated. In all the different types of early years provision, adults' effort over planning should enable a breadth of experiences that young children judge to be worth their time and energy: worth exploring, worth talking and thinking about, worth revisiting, recalling and sharing with other people.

Planning matters; I will stand up for the importance of planning as an integral part of best early years practice. Yet a proportion of early years practitioners are uncertain, sometimes anxious, about how to plan in ways that genuinely support children's learning and contribute to an enjoyable and satisfying early childhood.



Planning should enable a breadth of experiences

A very great deal rests upon what early years practitioners believe – and have been told – is meant by the words 'planning' and 'plans'. When practitioners say: "We're supposed to plan", what kind of activity is uppermost in their mind?

In my training and consultancy, I became increasingly aware that, for some of the early years workforce, 'planning' exclusively means written plans. There is nothing wrong with writing down forward plans if they have evolved from a thoughtful process of planning. When children are involved in planning that is meaningful to them, they are often keen that somebody should "write down our important ideas" and "we must not forget what we've decided". The problems arise when plans have been drafted in detail, sometimes well in advance and practitioners are uneasy about letting a plan change in response to children's expressed interests on the day. Such problems multiply when the written plan has been created by adults who have no personal knowledge of these individual young children.

This book explores ways to understand the process of looking ahead on behalf of young learners – without getting bogged down in the kind of pre-packaged activity approach that takes the zest out of potentially enjoyable experiences.

The book is broken down into three key sections:

- The importance of planning and what 'planning' and 'plans' mean. What kind of planning works best to support young children as they learn? (pages 3-14).
- Planning within early childhood provision that flows through the learning environment – with examples to show what best practice for young children looks like in action (pages 23-35).
- The role of leading good practice: helping others to understand the key issues and pathways to improving current practice (pages 41-68).

Planning as a flexible and thoughtful process

Why should early years practitioners plan?

Planning does matter; a developmentally appropriate approach to planning can make a positive difference to the experiences of young children. However, the reflective approach that needs to go hand-in-hand with planning starts with this question: “Why plan?”. Asking “why?”, or “what for?” if you prefer, addresses the best list of priorities when planning for young children’s learning.

The top priority should be that early years practitioners give time and energy to planning in order to benefit the children. You consider what you offer and in what ways, because you are committed to providing experiences that are developmentally appropriate for babies, toddlers and young children. You give energy to getting to know individual children so that anything you plan will be well suited to their age, ability and current interests and preferences. You avoid any kind of planning that rests upon a ‘one-size-fits-all’ philosophy.

Close behind the benefits to children as an answer to “why?” should be a focus on the adults who spend their days with young children. Close attention to planning will enable you and your colleagues to keep your knowledge of child development fresh. A sensible approach to planning will allow you to revisit your expectations of what children might be able to do, as well as what are realistic next steps. As a professional, the planning process is a good way of keeping you aware of all aspects of development and ensuring that some potential areas of learning do not push aside others.

The answer to “why should we plan?” should never be “to keep the inspector happy” nor “because we have to”. You do not plan an activity exclusively, or mainly, to meet the goal of showing another adult that you have plans. This answer to the “why?” question, and the anxiety that usually underpins it, is a warning that practitioners have been persuaded into believing that planning is not a thoughtful process. Instead, planning is

POINT FOR REFLECTION

What does useful planning look like?

What might happen if early years practitioners did not bother to plan ahead in any way at all? Children’s experiences with you over early childhood could be very limited. However much young boys and girls would love to cook, their familiar adults would never have got around to organising the ingredients, or even better, going out together on a shopping trip.

A great deal depends on what practitioners mean by the word ‘planning’. Planning to be able to cook will not be enjoyable if, in practice, this means children are waiting while the adult does almost everything. Then they are allowed to decorate the finished product – and every child will make a fairy cake whether they want to or not.

There is plenty of space for discussion between the two extremes for planning. Young children do not enjoy, nor benefit from, a highly regimented day or session. On the other hand, they are not well supported by practitioners who pass by good opportunities out of fear of ‘interfering’ with children’s play.

in practice no more than written plans – pieces of paper, which may have no benefit for young children at all.

What should the word ‘planning’ mean?

Planning is an active process, either working as an individual, thoughtful practitioner, or when a small group of people get

Example: planning for young children



Enjoyment with 'in', 'through' and 'out again'

In Grove House Infant and Toddler Centre, several children were keen to practise their balancing on a low course created by hard plastic planks resting on blocks and making a five-sided shape. Older toddlers and twos walked around this challenge, with a helping hand available if they wanted it. Several two-year-olds were also enthusiastic about practising their already impressive jumping skills (see page 16).

In terms of planning to support 'next steps', this example is about the literal next steps for very young children. The adult short-term decision was closely linked with what they had observed. A number of the children wanted to balance and an appropriate next step was to offer exactly that opportunity. This option was possible because of the approach to long-term and short-term planning within the Infant and Toddler Centre (ITC) team.

The ITC team had planned ahead over the last year to reorganise their outdoor learning environment. The resources for balancing were a useful reminder, along with the barrel and base, that opportunities for clambering, jumping or balancing do not depend on fixed climbing equipment. In fact, as part of the re-thinking of the under threes outdoor space, the ITC

team had decided to remove a climbing and sliding large piece of equipment, since it occupied quite a lot of space. Their decision had enabled them to bring in separate items of equipment that could be used in a more flexible way to support young children's physical skills. So, within the week of my visit the team had the space to lay out equipment well suited to meet the children's wish to balance, clamber and jump.

The ITC team plan enhancements to the permanent play provision – indoors as well as outside – from what they observe has interested these very young children. These short-term planned changes happen within the week, often the next day and sometimes as an immediate response to something a child does or says (see page 21).

The ITC team, along with the nursery team of Grove House Children's Centre, also apply the skills of planning to ensuring plenty of time for children to become immersed in their current interest. Planning around deployment of adults ensures that practitioners are easily available for children. The shared understanding is that any adult-initiated activity is left flexible for children to influence.

Leading a thoughtful approach

Managers and other senior practitioners are responsible for guiding the early years team towards an approach to planning that genuinely supports young learning. Practitioners who usually work alone, such as childminders, can feel isolated over this kind of professional reflection. So, it is important to draw on available local support such as early years advisors with special responsibility for the childminding service and local networks.

Planning that supports active learners

Part of the senior role has to be a clear understanding of what is, and is not, required in the national early years framework that applies to your part of the UK. The national early years frameworks across the UK all expect that practitioners will exercise their skills of planning. The details vary between the four countries of the UK: the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England (DfE, 2012), the Foundation Phase in Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008), the Curriculum in Excellence in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2008) and the possibilities in the Early Years (0-6) Strategy in process in Northern Ireland (Department of Education, 2010).

Managers and senior practitioners have to become familiar with the early years framework that applies to them. The task is very often to be crystal clear about what is non-negotiable: the statutory part of any framework. These requirements are different from guidance: the part of a pack or additional publications that provide explanations, ideas, suggestions and maybe specific examples of practice. For instance, in England the first edition of the EYFS in 2007 included both a statutory section and a guidance section, supplemented by the Principles into Practice cards. Many other booklets and CDs followed from the National Strategies team. These were all guidance documents, although they were sometimes discussed as if everyone had to follow any suggested pro forma for observation, recording and planning.

Within their different formats the different early years statutory frameworks have strands in common that apply to planning:

- The importance of learning through the medium of play within early childhood – with a balance between experiences planned by adults and children’s self-chosen play.
- Planning by practitioners should pay close attention to the interests and current development of individual children.
- This observation-led planning should enable young children to stretch beyond their current skills and understanding, but should not impose unrealistic expectations.
- Forward planning should place equal value on all the areas of learning for development over early childhood, as they are described in this framework.
- Planning and evaluation of experiences should acknowledge how a positive experience for young children will support more than one area of learning.

Leading a team, or thinking deeply about your own practice, involves reflection around what these key strands mean and how some beliefs about planning could disrupt young learning. For instance, a positive focus on learning through play can be undermined by some interpretations of phrases much used in documents such as ‘well planned play’ or ‘structured play’. The more adult-dominated approaches to planning risk imposing so much structure onto an alleged play activity that any playfulness has been organised out of the experience (Lindon, 2001 and 2012e). A developmentally appropriate interpretation of planning around play leads to experiences that familiar practitioners have organised on the basis of knowledge of these young children, who then enjoy this time.

It is never good early years practice when everything has been decided, by the adults, before children ever get their eyes and

Example: cutting and drawing



Cutting and making

In Grove House Infant and Toddler Centre, three older toddlers and twos were enjoying a simple activity of cutting cereal boxes, occasionally squashing them as well, and adding strips of paper. They took breaks to chat and look at what the other children at the table had chosen to do.

The practitioner sitting with the children had planned this activity from her observations that some children wanted to cut with scissors but struggled with the skill. She had gathered the boxes because she knew some of the children could manage to cut card. She had cut some paper into strips beforehand, because the children found it difficult to cut whole sheets of paper. This adjustment enabled some children to feel a sense of achievement by cutting the strips, which could also be held taut by an adult. This example shows attention to appropriate next steps considered by an adult who knew the children well. She had prepared just enough to enable these young children to extend their skills.

On a table in the front room some twos were busy with large pieces of paper. They had crayons and biros but several children over the morning were most enthused about using



A chance to draw with biros

the biros. Young boys and girls focused carefully, out of choice, and made a series of deliberate swirly marks, some of them tight spirals of repeated circling movements. Later in the day other children were drawing spiders and spidery shapes. They all held their biro with care and regularly stopped to look closely at what they had done before resuming this meaningful mark making. The children chose what to draw but adults were ready to admire what they managed. At one point a practitioner said: 'Fantastic' about a very detailed drawing done by a young boy and he repeated the word accurately – with a pleased expression on his face.

These very young children were able to select from resources made available on the basis of adult observations of existing skills. The children are secure within their learning journey towards literacy, in terms of making deliberate and meaningful marks. Appropriate next steps will be more opportunities like this, as well as the support from the children's learning environment which shows writing for a reason, along with visual material. There is good reason to predict that children will be fully confident in their skills of mark making by the time the abstract concept of written letters has begun to make sense to them.