

Child-Initiated Learning

Positive Relationships in the Early Years

by Jennie Lindon

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Updated to
reflect the
2012 EYFS



Published by Practical Pre-School Books, A Division of MA Education Ltd, St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, Herne Hill, London, SE24 0PB.
Tel: 020 7738 5454 www.practicalpreschoolbooks.com

© MA Education Ltd 2010. Revised edition 2013. Illustrations by Cathy Hughes. Front cover image photo taken by Lucie Carlier © MA Education Ltd.

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ISBN 978-1-909280-20-5

Children's interests at the heart of learning

Young children have only one go at their early childhood.

- They should emerge with a store of treasured memories and secure that they really matter to a small number of adults, with whom they have spent their time.
- Adults are responsible for cherishing young children, ensuring that they feel liked for who they are and competent within their own world.
- Children need an early childhood in which they have plenty of time to explore, alongside adults who respect young children's interests and how they learn.

Best practice over the long history of early years provision has been that: days for young children should be full of opportunities for children to learn within a nurturing environment, through their self-chosen play and with generous time outdoors. The role of supporting adults is: to protect that time, provide suitable resources and be a friendly play and conversational partner, whilst taking good care of the physical and emotional needs of babies and young children. Genuinely helpful early years practitioners – and parents too – need to have realistic expectations based on a close relationship with this individual baby or child, as well as a sound basis of child development knowledge in general.

In their different ways, the early years frameworks which apply to each part of the UK support this perspective on early childhood. However, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in England is the only Birth to Five framework within the UK. Wales and Northern Ireland start with three-year-olds and Scotland has an under-threes framework separate from the 3-17 Curriculum for Excellence. The ideas that follow in this book are relevant to early years provision across the UK, but the cross-referencing is mainly to the EYFS.

What does child-initiated mean?

The first edition of the EYFS (2007) created a strong focus on the importance of child-initiated learning through children's active choice about what to do within any day. The role of early years practitioners is that of supporting young children to learn at their own pace and in ways that make sense to them.

The recently revised EYFS (DfE, 2012) has confirmed this essential approach in section 1.9. This part of the statutory

framework reaffirms the importance of play and a balanced mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity. A key sentence is that: '*Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults*'. The Welsh Foundation Phase framework (2008) has a similar focus on children's ability to choose freely from a range of activities. Adult input is valuable, but only when the approach to planning is flexible.

So what does the phrase 'child-initiated' actually mean? In my dictionary, the word 'initiate' is defined as to 'begin, commence, enter upon, to introduce, set going, originate'. So, child-initiated activities and experiences are those which babies or children have indicated they want to do and in this way. The children are the originators; they set this current activity going from what is available to them. Through their personal choice, young children – including babies and young toddlers – are busy directing their own learning.

They can do something that is interesting or exciting to them and then repeat immediately, if they wish. They can practise those skills they are motivated to improve. They explore through actions and their powers of communication, using what they want to show or ask you. The phrase child-initiated learning can only make sense when children have plenty of scope to decide what deserves their time and full attention on any given day.

Practice Guidance

The first edition of the EYFS did not explain what was meant by the terms child-initiated or adult-led. This was a regrettable oversight, given that a serious problem had been created in recent years because a primary school definition of child-initiated had infiltrated early years practice. This primary-based approach promoted the view that activities could be judged as child-initiated, when an adult had pre-determined most of the details of the experience before young children ever got their hands and eyes on any resources. Within the more structured primary school day these timetabled sections of the day might also be called independent learning times. More accurately, they are times when children are able to remain focused on a selected array of resources without the presence of a guiding adult. This working definition of child-initiated continues to appear in some practical materials written for early years practitioners.

This misguided perspective – for early childhood – was supported over the same period by the imposition of an outcomes-led lesson plan approach. This view depended on

the bizarre idea that it was actually possible to design and run activities for young children that would assuredly deliver specific learning outcomes. Such a developmentally unsound notion creaked around the edges when applied to the eldest children within the early childhood age range. It progressively cracked when applied to three- or four-year-olds and shattered when practitioners tried to apply inflexible, pre-planned activities to toddlers and babies.

Fortunately, the second edition of the EYFS (in 2008) added a new section to the Practice Guidance booklet on page 7. It was made very clear that child-initiated activities are self-chosen from a well-resourced learning environment, for instance that a child decides to play with the fire engine and determines how that play unfolds in detail. A further example given was that a child brings an item into their early years setting, or talks about an

experience from family life. Early years practitioners then support this expressed interest with relevant resources. It was also made clear that children may initiate their own choices by taking ownership of an adult-initiated activity. The example given was of a child choosing to pour water into a hole to create a puddle, rather than water the plants as the adult had envisaged.

Best early years practice is full of young children, busy following their own enterprises, fully supported by equally interested adults. This book is resourced by examples I gained easily from my visits to the settings thanked on page 38. Those visits were usually one day only; the longest was two days. Here is the first example to begin the process of sharing what child-initiated learning looks like for real children in actual provision. Please look for echoes of your own good practice in this description.

Look closer: The drummers who became plumbers

An absorbing child-initiated experience (stretched to 40 minutes) on my visit to Kennet Day Nursery started when three boys selected large kitchen implements which were in the large tray for scooping pasta. The children started to use them for drumming and tapping on the outdoor equipment. This choice meant that there were no more implements in the pasta, so one practitioner suggested: "Shall we go and find some sticks inside. I'm sure we have some". The children came back with handfuls of sticks – some wooden chopsticks and some long paintbrushes, which they held by the brush end.

Five children, four boys and one girl started to drum on the fixed outdoor cylinders that reverberated like drums. The children used different techniques: using one stick, two sticks and then one boy tapped one stick onto his other stick and told the practitioner: "That's what real drummers do". One boy started to tap two drum cylinders at the same time. A girl was experimenting with tapping the metal bars of the bridge structure of their outdoor climbing equipment.

Another practitioner joined the children and began to experiment with his own rhythm, also using two chopsticks. He did not suggest that the children – now three boys – copy him; he was playing alongside. But they chose to imitate some of the rhythmic patterns that the adult had created. He and the boys continued to drum together in companionable sound making, sometimes keeping very close to a shared beat. After some time, this practitioner moved to join the girl who was still experimenting with tapping the metal bars of the bridge.



The role of the early years practitioner

The quality of experiences for young children stands or falls on what you do: how you interact with children on a personal level and within an ongoing relationship with them and their families. Observation, planning and a developmentally appropriate approach to assessment are all significant contributions to best early years practice. However, paperwork and background organisation – even the most sensible forms of documentation – do not in themselves make a positive difference to the quality of children's early experiences. Only real people can do that: familiar practitioners who are in an ongoing relationship with children – adults who listen, look, think, talk and join in play and conversation.

Being a partner in play

Early years practitioners need to be comfortable in the role of a play companion, who will be welcome to young children – rather than someone to be avoided as a nuisance and a play spoiler. Adults can make a positive difference to early learning but the route is as an equal play partner, sometimes called a 'co-player'.

The EYFS materials have made a consistent stand in support of play-based experiences for young children and for early years practitioners to focus on learning through play. The approach is confirmed in the revised Statutory Framework with: *"Each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity"* (DfE, 2012: paragraph 1.9, page 6). That middle phrase – planned, purposeful play continued to be symbolic of problems that have arisen from a particular outlook on what is meant in practice by learning through play. The Welsh Foundation Phase has similar issues within the guidance (2008) with phrases like 'well-planned play', 'structured educational play' and 'active educational play'. Please think about the nature of real play for children – experiences that are full of playfulness and to which children themselves feel highly committed.

Play belongs to children; adults are visitors in that world of exploration.

- Early years practitioners are welcome guests when they show respect and genuine enthusiasm to be a partner in playful enterprises.

Food for thought

A well-informed adult play partner also understands the ways in which playful enterprises evolve over the years of early childhood. Some resource materials about the stages of social play still claim that babies and children under two years of age play alone and that there is little interaction with other children. It is also sometimes claimed that two-year-olds watch and play alongside but do not ever play together.

This misinformation does not survive ten minutes of unbiased observation of babies, toddlers and very young children. Their play patterns are different from those of over-threes. But the younger children do make direct contact with each other. When circumstances enable very young children to become familiar with peers, or children of a different age, they can be observed in joint explorations and shared games to which they return day after day.



Leading a child-focused approach

This section does not exclusively speak to early years practitioners who manage the different types of group provision and their colleagues who form the senior team, many of the points are equally relevant to childminders: you lead yourself in a child-focused approach (if that does not seem an odd concept).

Senior practitioners and those working as sole practitioners, need to be familiar with the details of the early years framework that applies to your part of the UK. In terms of the EYFS, managers must take a lead for their staff in understanding what is required and, just as much, the considerable amount that is open to your professional judgement. You need to know good early years practice thoroughly in order to challenge – in a professional way – an inspector or any other official visitor – who expects to see lesson plans or other approaches which would be poor EYFS practice. The Ofsted website (page 37) makes public the guidance that inspectors must follow and the most recent edition (2012) applied to the revised EYFS. Pages 10-11 are especially relevant to this section and start with a valuable reminder that best practice is never about a ‘race’ towards the early learning goals.

Early years practitioners are expected to make observations, to reach considered judgements from those observations and to plan ahead in a flexible way – so that children have a breadth of experiences. However, neither the previous, nor the revised EYFS, nor the Ofsted inspectorate seek to determine the exact way in which practitioners should observe, record or plan ahead. The inspectors are expected to be alert for examples of self-chosen play and – again very valuable – directed not to expect written plans for everything. However, managers and practitioners have a responsibility to be ready to talk about aspects of their good practice and be able to explain choices, decisions and how your approach works to benefit children.

Planning that pays off for children

The more adults prepare activities in advance, the less children have a shared ownership and feeling of engagement in the enterprise. The most effective adult-led or initiated experiences have plenty of scope for children to determine how the details evolve over time. Planning does matter and adult thoughtfulness is part of best early years practice. But the big question is what does that word ‘planning’ actually mean to practitioners? What should planning mean, if early childhood is to be an interesting time, full of genuine learning and

welcome memories for young children – and the adults who share their days?

A developmentally appropriate perspective on planning has to be based fully within a personal relationship with children, and their families – the reason why this book is grounded within the EYFS strand of Positive Relationships.

- A good rule of thumb is that it should never be difficult for practitioners to complete the sentence: “Today (or this week) has been different because...” with a change that has come about because of what babies or children did, said or requested this morning, yesterday or last week.
- Try this question applied to your own practice. If you struggle for an answer, then it is most likely a sign that you, and your colleagues in a team, are over-organising children’s days in advance.
- Wise planning for, and with, young children has never been about written plans, established well in advance and perhaps even drafted by somebody who has never met these individual children.

