

# Play and Learning in the Early Years

Jennie Lindon, Kevin Kelman and Alice Sharp

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Publisher's Note: In this book the use of she, her or hers is gender neutral and is intended to include both sexes.

# A time of learning

Babies and toddlers are primed to learn and recent research into the development of the human brain has shown the significance of appropriate early experiences. Realistic expectations, based on reliable information about development, are crucial for good early years practice. It is important that you do not expect too much, too soon – but also that you do not underestimate the skills and understanding of very young children. The difference between a young baby and a three year old is visible and striking. However, by three years of age it is also possible to see the differences between young children who have had happy and interesting early years and those who are already uncertain about their abilities and how adults will treat them.

## What is happening around young children?

Babies and young children have not changed at all. However, some parts of the UK have now issued guidance about the care and learning needs of babies and very young children, when they attend registered early years provision of any kind.

Up to 2002 any national early childhood guidance across the UK was focussed on the over threes. In the autumn of that year the Birth to Three Matters framework was introduced in England and in 2005 Scotland launched their Birth to Three: Supporting our Youngest Children. The English and Scottish under threes materials looked different but the principles and practical applications were very similar.

The most recent change (at the time of writing) is that from September 2008 in England the Birth to Three Matters framework and the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (applying to three-, four- and five-year-olds) will both be replaced by the Early Years Foundation Stage. The EYFS covers the full early childhood from birth to five years. Practitioners will recognise a great deal of the content of Birth to Three Matters within the EYFS materials.

## A positive outlook on very young children

Under threes deserve our respect just as much as our attentive care. The following key principles underpin all the suggestions in this book. They are fully compatible with those expressed in national guidance.

### Under threes are interesting in their own right

You need to focus on individual babies and toddlers as they are in the present, rather than on developmental stages or milestones that are weeks or months into the future. A sound knowledge of child development does matter, but also a firm grasp of the holistic, connected nature of young learning. Babies and very young children do not learn in separate categories. Within any experience or activity, young skills and enthusiasm will always embrace more than one aspect or area of learning.

- Appreciate babies and toddlers as they are now: what they can manage and what they can nearly do, what they find fascinating and the ways in which they relate to the world. What they are learning is important for itself and not just for what will happen later.
- If you are alert to all the exciting smaller changes and learning, an individual baby or young child will learn more easily. Also, your day will be more interesting and satisfying.
- Get into the habit of 'baby watching' and notice what individual babies and toddlers do and how they do it. Keep notes as appropriate and take photos. (You will have cleared this option with parents when their child joins your provision.) Then you can share your observations with parents and you can all look back with interest.

### Care and caring matter

Emotional security is a non-negotiable priority for babies and very young children. Early learning cannot be supported if personal care is undervalued - if very young children cannot count on a nurturing environment. Young children did not create the artificial division between 'care'

and 'education' that remains a problem within early years services.

- Nurture matters a very great deal to young children. They appreciate and are warmed by personal and respectful attention to their physical needs.
- Babies and toddlers will learn better in an environment where care genuinely matters and is never seen as somehow second best to 'educational' activities, however those are defined.
- Personal care routines are valuable times for warm communication and developing a close relationship between baby and carer.
- Very young children learn when they are welcomed as active helpers in simple domestic routines.

## Young children deserve generous time and attention

Admittedly, some days can seem very full and busy. But it is possible to become more harassed than necessary by losing your perspective on how very young children learn.

- The early years are indeed a window of opportunity, but only if caring adults go at the baby's pace and in tune with a child's interests.
- Children switch off learning if they are pressurised and constantly directed by what adults think they ought to be learning now.
- You and the children have time: to relish experiences, to do interesting activities again, to stop and look and just to be together.

## Flexible planning rests on a child-friendly rhythm to the day

It is useful to have some plans for each day and young children like a sense of routine.

- You need to look at a baby's or toddler's day as a whole and not as a list of separate activities. By all means plan ahead for possibilities over a week and the separate days. But then go with the flow of what interests the children each day. Be ready to pause, change direction and to follow a child's lead.
- Look towards what works well in family life. Home-based learning is the developmentally appropriate model for very young children – and that approach should not stop at three years. There is serious concern about over threes who are pushed into formal and very adult-controlled days.
- Young children relish a blend of novelty and familiarity. They enjoy new experiences, but they also learn from recognising a play activity or local outing. Sometimes the best choice for learning is 'let's do it again!'

Enjoy – there is no obligation always to make something. Older babies and toddlers like hands-on activities, such as play dough, simple sticking and drawing.

- Enjoy the activity with the toddlers and do not be concerned whether something emerges that can be used as a display. Enjoyable learning will often leave a happy memory, rather than an end product like a picture or model.
- Share with parents how much the children enjoyed the finger painting or how they have learned to use a thick crayon.
- Be careful not to push very young children into making something just because you feel a pressure to show an item to parents at the end of the day.

## Caring adults count more than equipment

Think of yourself as the most vital item of play equipment in your nursery or home setting.

- If you relate warmly to babies and toddlers, they will learn supported within that relationship. On the other hand, when adults are uninvolved or uninterested in babies and toddlers, then good play equipment cannot make up that loss.
- Try to see the world through their eyes and hear with their ears. They have so much to learn and what is obvious to you may be intriguing or puzzling to them.
- Be close to very young children and at their eye level. Make it easy for them to engage with you.
- Be enthusiastic about activities with the children, be a part of what they do. If you are genuinely interested, children are more likely to learn.

## Balance safety with interest and opportunity for adventure

Babies and toddlers have no sense of danger and their natural curiosity can lead them into trouble.

- They need your keen eye for their safety. But look for ways to meet their curiosity rather than limit them to a safe but boring world.
- If you are closely engaged with them, you can keep very young children safe by gentle intervention that does not disrupt their play.
- Any setting should remove obvious hazards and avoid the preventable accidents. However, babies and toddlers will not be able to learn if adults are so concerned about a long list of what could go wrong that they remove anything of interest.

## Important note:

All the ideas within this book assume that adults will be attentive and closely involved in the play of very young children. None are intended as something you set out and then leave for young children to do on their own. Our assumption is that a caring and interested adult will always be close to babies and toddlers. Although some suggestions have additional safety reminders, this general comment applies to everything that follows.

for a few of the toddler activities. Three- or even four-year-olds will still enjoy some ideas first introduced for younger children. You can also choose ideas to fit the developmental stage of children, whose early experience or disability means that they will benefit from a range of play activities more usually offered to younger children.

There are five broad theme areas that are repeated within each age section:

- Developing relationships: early communication and social life;
- Using the senses: vision, touch, smell and hearing;
- Language and Creative Development: arts and crafts, music and stories;
- Physical Development: large and fine physical skills;
- Using the environment: outdoor play and trips out.

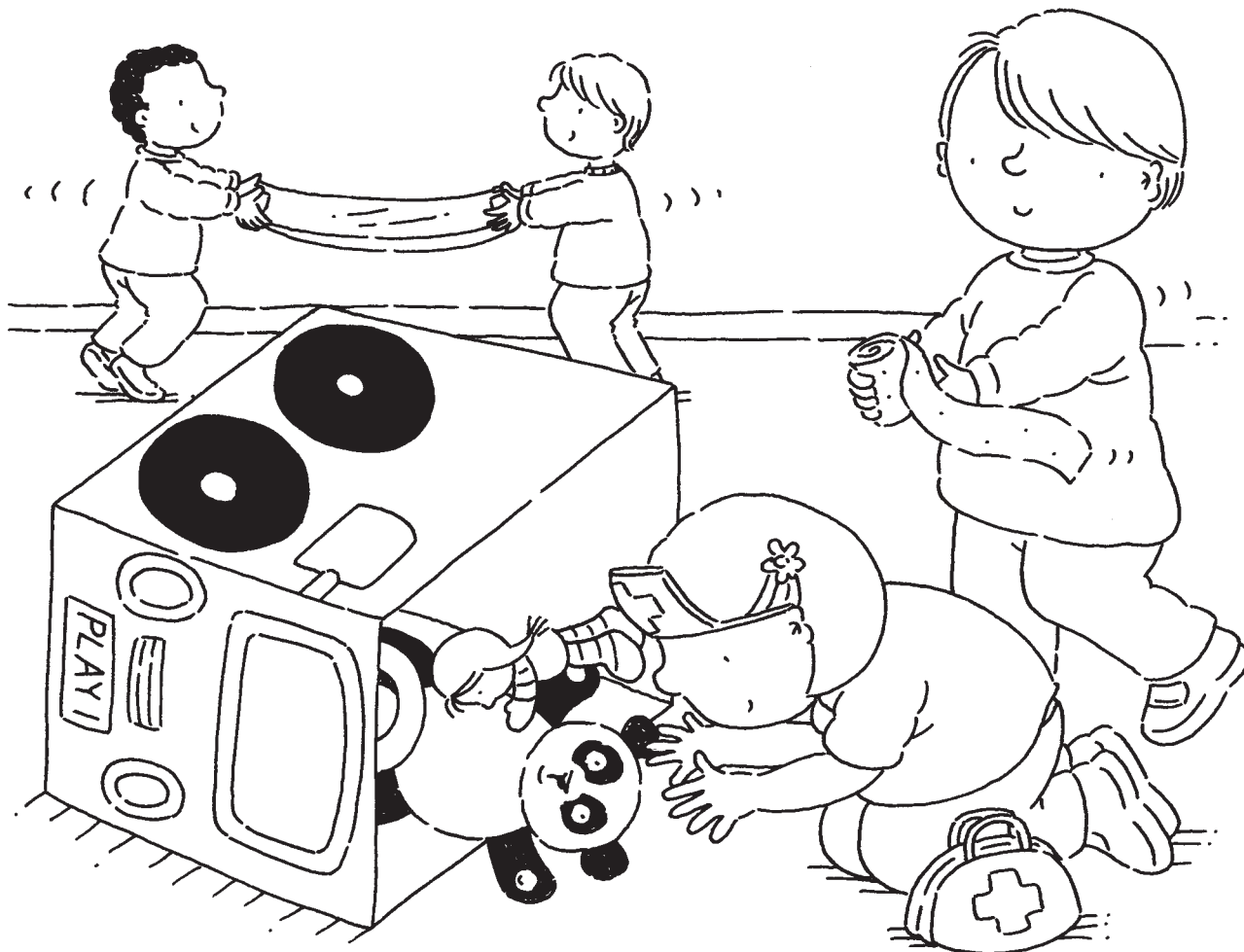
The aim is that you use this material as a resource, to draw on and re-organise as suits the children and your setting. It is not intended that you treat any section as an inflexible programme to be done with the children from beginning to end.

## How to use this book

The book is organised into three main age sections:

- Under twelve months – the babies
- From one to two years of age – the toddlers
- From two to three years of age – very young children.

We are aware that the English EYFS has a series of overlapping age spans. We found it more workable to stay with one year of life. Some older babies will be ready



# Using the senses

## Seeing, exploring and understanding

### Developmental focus

Young children can see what you see, assuming nobody has visual disabilities, but they cannot yet make sense of everything. Young children are building up their experience of the world and this includes visual information about qualities of objects such as shapes, size or colour. They need broad opportunities to use their vision in everyday activities, then they will in time be ready to assign the words to these qualities. They are best helped by adults who comment appropriately on what they and the child can see. You 'drop' words into the conversation about 'big', 'green', 'round' or 'high up' and children can link your words to what they see. In time they will use this vocabulary in their own speech.

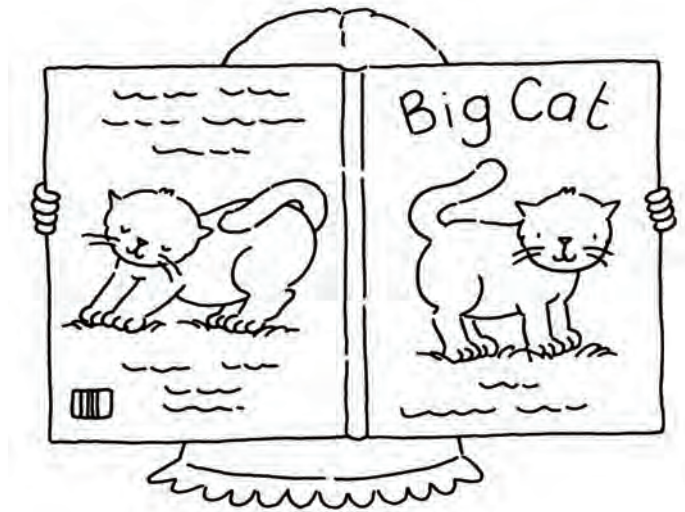
Young children's ability to concentrate will steadily extend when they are encouraged and enabled to look carefully and to scan for detail. They enjoy this focussed play and involvement in ordinary daily tasks. Sometimes they just enjoy looking at interesting or new sights. Involved adults can encourage children's willingness to stop and stare and sometimes to be enchanted.

### Busy pictures

- Get books or posters with large pictures of familiar scenes or events. Encourage children to look at the pictures, scanning the details in a relaxed way.

### Pause for thought

The EYFS places great importance on considered organisation of the learning environment for young children – outdoors as well as indoors. A clear system for storing materials and equipment, helps children to put away as well as get out items. They can look and check, as well as remember where the cars, jigsaws or tools are kept. Labelling storage areas or containers with simple pictures, as well as a written label, helps children to look carefully and to take care of their environment.



- Ask them to choose their favourite part of the picture and to talk about it if they wish. You can invite in an open-ended way such as, 'Tell me about the...' or 'what's going on in that corner?'
- Play search-and-find by asking the children to spot objects, animals or people in a book or a poster picture. Begin with easy and familiar items, then try a few more difficult suggestions.
- If children are intrigued by this spotting game, hold up an item and ask the children to find it in the picture. Make some collections of items that link with a given picture.

### Copy me

- Stand in front of the children and get them to face you. While demonstrating and naming actions, encourage the children to copy you. For example, touch the floor, jump up and wiggle your nose.
- Get the children to suggest actions and you copy them.
- Develop this idea by introducing the children to 'Simon Says'. Feel free to change it to your own name. And introduce children to action songs where they have to use hand-eye co-ordination, such as 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes' and 'if you're happy and you know it, clap your hands'.

### Can you find it?

- Make two sets of ten cards with pictures of everyday items that can be found in the nursery and are easily accessible.

- Place one set of cards in a bright attractive bag and invite the children to explore its contents.
- Ask questions like 'what have we got here?' to ensure that each child can identify the items on the cards. Draw their attention to the cards, one at a time, then ask them to find the real item in the room.
- Talk about the pictures with the children. You might comment on the item itself, the colour, shape or size and where the real item is kept in your room (but not all in one long exchange!)
- Get the children to place the item and the card next to one another.
- Develop this activity by placing the second set of cards around the room - on the walls, chairs, table, sink and so on. Hold up a card and ask the children to find its matching partner. Alternatively, shuffle both sets of cards, turn them upside down on the floor, get each child to pick a card and let the others take turns to find its partner.
- Or play 'I spy' with qualities that young children will recognise, for instance, 'I spy with my little eye something that is very fluffy' or 'something that goes "squeak!"'
- Take photos of local features outdoors such as the nursery's sign, a local shop and a telephone kiosk. Give the children some of the photos, take them on a walk and ask them to look for the items in their photos. Help them as much as they wish. Alternatively, use photos of natural items such as fir cones, leaves and twigs.

## Touch and feel

### Developmental focus

Young children now have a well-developed and sensitive use of touch. This sense is combined with good abilities to look, grasp and manipulate small and larger objects. They learn from a wide experience of appropriate hands-on experience of play materials and ordinary objects. Children have some understanding of unpleasant touch, things that are too hot or that hurt or scrape them. They are still learning about common dangers and need adults' patience and guidance to continue to understand so that they can increasingly take good care of themselves.

Friendly touch as contact, communication and comfort is still important and children may use touch to comfort a friend. They will appreciate your close contact so long as you respect individual preferences in how young children want to be comforted and do not demand cuddles as an adult right.

## Socks off!

- Help children to take off their shoes and socks. Join in barefoot yourself.
- Sit on the floor with the children and wriggle your toes about.
- Try feeling different objects with just the feet; children can close their eyes and try to guess if they want. Try a banana, potato or other familiar fruit and vegetables. Feel a book, a teddy, paper tissues or building bricks.
- Try to pick up objects with both feet or the toes. It is not easy, so emphasise the fun in trying.
- Walk on different textured surfaces: some lino, a piece of deep pile carpet, some textured wallpaper, a rectangle of foam or the wadding used in quilting, a roll of cotton wool and popper wrap. Introduce words like 'soft', 'rough', 'scratchy' or 'slippery'.
- Put bare feet in the sand pit or a bowl of soft sand. Wriggle your toes in the sand, bury your own or a child's feet and watch the toes break free.

## Different strokes

- Make a feely book with the children. Have a wide range of materials and sort them out by feel.
- Encourage the children to stroke and touch the materials and help them with the words to describe what they feel. Soft feels from silk and velvet, flower petals, feathers or cotton wool. Rough textures from velcro, some leaves or a flat scourer. Shiny material from flattened milk bottle tops or lengths of ribbon.
- Some materials may be hard to describe: a bath sponge may be rough or squishy, knitting wool may be fluffy or a bit scratchy.
- Stick the materials into a scrap book, letting the children make their own choices from the available materials.
- Choose some books about touch and the other senses to read to children. One example is the *Touch and Feel* series (Dorling Kindersley).

## Eyes closed

- Take some familiar objects and toys and put them into a large cloth bag or a cardboard box with a lid.
- Children put a hand into the bag or box, feel for an object and try to guess what it is before bringing it out to see.
- Encourage children to feel carefully before guessing and help them with the words to describe what they can feel.
- Join in the game yourself and make a couple of deliberate mistakes, especially if the children find it hard to guess.