

Provision and Progress for Two Year Olds

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2

An environment for learning

This chapter includes:

- an overview of young children learning;
- supporting the characteristics of effective learning;
- creating a facilitating environment;
- further reflection: theories and trends;
- further reading;
- Parent file: young children learning.



Young children learning

Babies are born curious, they try out new things, become involved and generally 'have a go' without fear of failing. Young children are also constantly learning and it is the role of the adults around to ensure that they maintain their learning drive and sustain their learning on an uphill trajectory. Young children who receive positive encouragement during these early years will go on to be creative and adventurous.

Adults can support learning by providing a suitable learning environment for children, one where they can develop their resilience and curiosity. The absence of an empowering environment can encourage young children to become passive and indifferent. Young children flourish when they are able to develop through their own learning characteristics. Although children learn in a unique way, the characteristics described below are shared by all children.

It is widely recognised that the shared learning characteristics include playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically (see Figure 2.1). Each of these areas is looked at in further detail below but in reality young children do not make distinctions in their learning. Each of the strands is intrinsically woven together and the learning that takes place is life long and ongoing.

The practitioner's role, with regard to the youngest children in their setting, is less reliant upon traditional pedagogic methods and instead focuses upon the practitioner's knowledge of child development and their commitment to building strong bonds and safe nurturing environments. The characteristics of effective learning allow practitioners to understand *how* young children learn. Once practitioners understand what children need to be able to learn, they can provide the enabling environments and the positive relationships that young children require. Once these are in place even the youngest children can then go on their own unique learning journey.

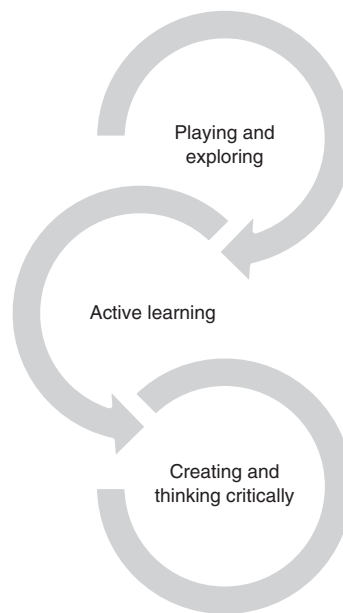


Figure 2.1 The characteristics of effective learning

Source: Based upon 'Characteristics of effective learning' in *Developing Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)* 2012, p.5.

A note on schemas

Schemas are patterns of linked behaviours that are commonly observed in two year olds. Once recognised they can be used by practitioners to facilitate a child's learning.

A schema can be described as an interest in something with actions which are repeated over and over again, in an observable pattern of behaviour. Through these, babies and children can develop their awareness of the world and so deepen their learning.

Schemas develop in clusters and link together in networks, and in babies and toddlers, schemas are based in the senses and in movement. As children get older the schemas become more complex and co-ordinated as they start to 'pretend' and explore through symbolic play. All children have schemas which are influenced by their experiences and environment, people, objects and culture.

There are many kinds of schemas, some of the most common being:

- connection – joining things like train tracks or using string or ribbons;
- envelopment – covering or wrapping things up or making dens;
- trajectories – lining up objects or moving to and fro (horizontal); building towers, pouring, throwing, jumping up and down (vertical);
- transporting – carrying things or pushing prams and carts;

- scattering – spreading small objects around, stamping in puddles.

Once recognised, a schema can be tapped into in order to develop the child's learning. It also can inform planning and resourcing.

Children who have similar schemas will tend to come together and will learn from each other and will often play amicably.

Supporting the characteristics of effective learning

Providing for playing and exploring

To support young children to play and explore and develop a confident 'can do' attitude provide:

'Open-ended' resources

These encourage young children to play, explore and create. These resources do not have limits and can be used in a variety of ways by children. 'Closed resources' dictate to children what the play should be and often restricts children's flow.

'Open-ended' resources can include cardboard boxes, blocks, duplo, collections of materials, natural objects such as sticks and stones, pebbles and shells, sand, water, blankets, play dough, creative materials and dressing-up materials.

Sensory experiences will still be very important and these should be plentiful opportunities to explore a variety of materials in different ways.

Resources and equipment that reflect children's recent experiences or current interests

These could be based upon a visit or a trip a child has made, a favourite book or character or any other starting point where a child has shown curiosity.

Flexible, accommodating and safe spaces

Provide a well-managed and ordered physical environment, both indoors and outdoors, where children can play without being interrupted and where they can easily access the materials they need.

Adults need to:

Provide and plan for a continuous, ever developing provision that meets the growing learning needs of the young children in their care.

Develop playfulness and remember that the development of the characteristics of effective learning is lifelong, so enjoy the learning experiences that you share with young children.

Show children you are interested in their play and discovery and use sensitivity to join in without taking over. Show wonder if something surprises or delights you.

Consider the plan, do, review approach and focus on what children do and say rather than on what they produce as an end product.

Notice children and respect their efforts and persistence. Be mindful that children's play and exploration is their work and be careful not to appear to judge their efforts.

Providing for enthusiastic, active learners

To support young children to show persistence, enjoyment and involvement, provide:

Opportunities which encourage children's independence and choice

Two year olds are naturally curious; they want to explore and discover. Young children will attempt many things simply because they want to, and when they are encouraged to make a choice they will receive satisfaction from both choosing and from doing. This, in turn, provides the motivation to continue with the activity or the challenge and is referred to as intrinsic motivation. Intrinsically motivated children are both involved in their own learning and will remember what they have learned. Children will then go on to set their own goals for their play and activities.

Practitioners can support children by:

- encouraging children to select resources, help them to 'plan and do' and to decide what they would like to use;
- encouraging children to talk about their learning including any difficulties or problems they have come across. Try not to offer solutions immediately but ask them what they think they could do to resolve the situation.

Have safe but challenging play opportunities for children both indoor and outdoor. Plan for young children not only to take part in familiar activities but also encounter new experiences. The familiar will reassure them and provide an opportunity to consolidate skills, and the new will stimulate their learning and will extend their play. Encourage 'safe' risk-taking and new challenges. Try to pay particular attention to the youngest and quietest children.

Facilitate play and thinking by being resourceful with the materials that you offer; look to the examples of 'forest school' type activities to encourage children to become deeply involved in their play. Allow young children the time and the choice to become engrossed in activities of their own choosing without the need for clearing up and tidying away too frequently.

Adults need to:

Talk to children about their plans for their activities, try to work out if you can assist them so that they can extend or become more focused on the task they have given themselves. Encourage even the youngest children to set goals for their play and become aware of different approaches. Take a genuine interest in their play and exploration without taking over their ideas. Follow children's lead and give them the space and time to become absorbed in activities. This may mean overseeing the sharing of equipment and resources.

Praise children for their efforts as this will encourage them to increase their learning capacity but be aware that some praise can appear as judgemental or hypercritical and may take away the child's independence and confidence, for example, 'well done but are you not going to make it taller?'

Praise children for:

- trying different approaches;
- persevering;
- refusing to give up;
- solving problems;
- showing attention to detail;
- having new ideas;
- having a go.

Providing for creativity and thinking

Learning how to be creative and think critically is one of the main aspects of developing individuality. These skills are an essential aspect of being a human being and are core to young children making progress with their learning.

Young children learn most through play as it is through play that children can begin to expand on their own experience and on what they have seen and heard. The practitioner's main role in this learning area is to provide **rich play experiences** as play should be looked at in the widest sense and not just in relation to an imaginative play area, although this is a core experience. Build in time and opportunity for children to explore and handle materials, follow up on experience, and find ways to represent and explore their own ideas. In order to do this, routines may need to be flexible and resources need to be open ended and without limits.

Adults need to:

Spend time supporting children to make the sorts of connections that produce frequent 'light bulb' moments by providing them with the tools to make breakthroughs. These tools could include:

- the language of thinking and learning;
- reminding children of any previous interests or similar situations that they may have had and allow them to make the connections between experiences and opportunities;
- sharing thinking aloud with children but try to allow them to make their own associations;
- role-modelling, being a learner, showing curiosity, puzzlement and wonder;
- encouraging wider thinking by 'talking your way through' a task is one way and also by adding 'but I could also do it this way ... ';
- using open-ended questions to expand thinking, for example, 'I wonder what would happen if you ... ' 'what should we do next ... ?' 'what else can you do with the ... ' 'tell me about your ... ';
- giving young children the time they need to think and do, this could be in relation to not stopping them to fit in with routines or when talking and engaging with them;
- using photographs and learning journals to encourage children to reflect and make the links between what they learned before and what they need to do now.

Promoting the characteristics of effective learning

(Use the prompts below to support your observations and planning)

Playing and exploring

- Curiosity
- Level of engagement
- Particular interests
- Taking a sensory approach
- Making a symbol out of an object, e.g. a pebble is a car
- Using own experiences in play
- Seeking new experiences
- Having a go
- Learning from previous mistakes
- Initiating play

Active learning

- Attention and focus
- Motivation
- Concentration
- Persistence
- Flexibility
- Methodology
- Enjoyment and satisfaction

Creativity and critical thinking

- Do they have their own ideas?
- Can they find ways to solve problems?
- Can they find new ways of doing things?
- Are they making links?
- Are they able to predict?
- Are they able to use skills of sequencing?
- Can they put into groups?
- Do they understand cause and effect?
- Are they planning?
- Do they strive to reach a goal?
- Are they able to change strategy?
- Can they review the process?



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A note on the early development of 'learning styles'

Successful practitioners know their children well. They can tell you about the interests of the child and can recognise a child's preferred way of exploring and learning. Two year old children will use a variety of learning styles and will not yet show a distinct preference although one may be beginning to emerge. To support children to learn it is useful, however, for practitioners to have an understanding of the learning styles which may be developing. Practitioners can then ensure that varied and effective learning opportunities exist within their setting.

Kinaesthetic-tactile learners will enjoy:

- 'Moving and doing' activities, for example, outdoor play, dance and musical activities.
- Doing whatever is being talked about, for example, during a story stamp their feet.
- Moving around or 'fiddling' with something while listening or talking.
- Being demonstrative and showing physical excitement such as 'talking' with their hands.
- Touching things in order to learn about them sometimes enthusiasm may lead to snatching and grabbing!

It is likely that most two year olds will show a preference for kinaesthetic learning.

Auditory learners will enjoy:

- Talking and hearing explanations, they may like to express themselves.
- Talking out loud and repeating what they have heard.
- Having things explained, for example, enjoy listening to adults.
- Talking to themselves while learning something new.
- Repeating new things they have learned, for example, repeats what the practitioner says during activities.

Visual learners will enjoy:

- Remembering visual details and will enjoy stories with props or pictures.
- Seeing what they are talking about and enjoys seeing things work, for example, watching worms, filling and pouring water.

(Continued)

- Responding to the use of visual timetables and photographs.

Use the insight you have gained to support and plan for a child's needs by incorporating interests and learning styles into all your planning for learning.

Creating a facilitating environment

When creating an appropriate learning environment for two year olds practitioners have many things to consider, such as the smooth running of their early years setting and meeting the physical and care needs of young children, whilst considering how young children learn and develop.

The physical environment

For many two year olds an early years setting can be an overwhelming, noisy and busy environment. A warm nurturing home from home type of atmosphere is more suited to the needs of most two year olds. A predictable but stimulating environment with plenty of opportunities for sensory experiences and exploration will provide both security and a base from which children can explore and learn.

- Appraise your setting by getting down to a child's level and seeing it as they do.
- Provide child-sized places for 'one-on-one moments' between children and children and children and adults.
- Have some vertical surfaces for painting and drawing at a child's level.
- Have plenty of space for working on the floor, have carpeted areas or use builders' trays.
- Limit furniture such as tables and chairs.
- Provide soft furnishings such as sofas for stories and cuddles.
- Make sure sand and water trays are of a suitable height or are floor based.
- Use natural and heuristic type materials whenever possible to allow for continued sensory exploration.
- Have designated areas outside or inside and particular spaces where running about is encouraged.
- Have small and cosy play areas.
- Set up some areas that are shielded from pathways, exits and so on. This stops 'walk through' which also often leads to knock over!

- Have a quiet area where children can go to relax, calm down or just be by themselves for a while. This can be an area with a low screen around it or even be a tent or den to feel safe and secure inside.
- Make sure that each child has a small piece of personal space to store their belongings

Planning for activities and resources

- Make sure there are resources and materials to allow different children to access the same activity at their own unique level.
- Anticipate and plan for the children who may need support at different activities either to help them access an activity or to extend the activity.
- Ensure that there are sufficient resources to allow children to share effectively or take turns but not an over-abundance of materials taking up all available space.
- Set up activities in a way that minimises overcrowding. Have clear ways of showing when an area is 'full' or how many children should be at an activity.
- Provide resources that will encourage collaborative play and that will enhance any interest in a schema.
- Make sure that you have thought about and planned for children with a variety of needs and learning styles.

The effective and flexible use of routines

- Have established routines but with some flexibility built in, these provide a sense of safety and reassurance for most young children.
- Have an element of predictability so that children know what is happening and what to expect from each session.
- Make sure that you talk about and prepare children for changes in the routine such as special visitors, trips or new activities.
- Give advance warning when an activity is about to change or stop.
- Allow for those children who may want to continue later by helping them to put away their, for example, model or painting in a safe place so that they can return to it.
- Establish manageable turn-taking systems for activities or toys which are in high demand, such as bikes!
- Be prepared to 'go with the flow'.



Photo 2.1 Outside with sand and containers

Further reflection: theories and trends

Cognitive constructivism

A theory about the emergence and development of children's thinking.

The child is actively engaged in learning with a focus on self-initiated discovery.

Cognitive development follows universal and invariant stages.

The idea and term 'schema' is linked to Piaget.

J. Piaget

Social constructivism

A child's cognitive development is a social process within a social matrix.

Learning based on real-life experiential learning.

Focus on the teacher as facilitator and the idea of the 'zone of proximal development'.

L. Vygotsky

Discovery learning/Constructivism

This stresses the importance of learning through discovery and problem-solving.

Idea of adults 'scaffolding' children's learning to support, challenge and extend understanding.

The importance of culture and language in developing thinking and constructing understanding.

J. Bruner

An individualised approach to teaching and learning which sees teachers and parents take on the role of children's learning partners, as facilitators and co-constructors of learning.

The environment is the third teacher as children are agents of their own learning.

Reggio Emilia

A system of early childhood education which has four components, the curriculum, assessment tools and practitioner's methods and training.

An emphasis on well-being, active learning and the plan-do-review cycle.

Highscope

Figure 2.2

Further reading

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Parent file

Young children learning

How young children learn

Babies are born with a natural curiosity and children and adults are constantly learning as learning is lifelong. Young children in particular learn by playing and exploring and learn best when they are given the space and time to become involved, have the opportunity to 'have a go' and when they are encouraged to think and share their ideas.

You can help your child to learn by:

- Thoughtfully joining in their play and allowing them to take the lead.
- Encouraging them to explore by introducing them to **open-ended** activities, i.e. activities that can go on and develop in the way they choose such as building bricks, playing with sand and water, play dough or through pretend play.
- Giving them opportunities for uninterrupted time to play and explore.
- Allowing them to stop and look when they are outdoors. Young children love take their time and look at or touch all manner of things from watching a bird to splashing in a puddle.
- Encouraging them to try out new toys, books and activities – but remember they will always like to go back to 'old favourites'.
- Offering your child a running commentary on what you are doing especially when you are carrying out chores at home e.g. 'now I am going to lay the table...'
- Model the language of learning when you are playing alongside your child say things such as 'I think...' 'How else can I do this'; 'I'm try to'; 'I wonder what will happen if I...'
- Allow your child free access to their toys and books as this will allow them to make choices about their play and become more independent.
- Notice what your child becomes curious about and try to help them to broaden their play, e.g. if your child loves water play let them wash the dishes with you and use water and a paint brush or cloth to 'clean' their toys or the garden furniture, etc.
- If your child loves a book such as *Dear Zoo* try to extend their interest by playing with small world animal toys with them or by having a trip to a real zoo.



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