

Effective practice: Supporting Learning



Key messages

- Observing, enabling and facilitating are the key ingredients of teaching in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).
- The term ‘support’ includes the care, attentiveness and interaction that facilitate learning, with teaching belonging within this.
- Bringing together knowledge about individual children and knowledge about what they can learn enables practitioners to plan and provide for meaningful next steps in learning.
- Adult support in the EYFS must include scope for independent learning, timely guidance and ongoing reassurance and encouragement to enable young children to feel secure, valued and individually well cared for. There should be a balance of child-initiated and adult-initiated activities.
- Children learn best through their interactions with people who know and relate to them well.
- Practitioners should place great store on listening to what parents say about their children’s needs and how they make themselves understood.
- Listening to children enables practitioners to create meaningful activities that help them to make connections and tackle new ideas.
- When children get to know practitioners, they trust and rely upon them to support, encourage and ‘feed’ their investigations.
- Through play in which they take the lead and make choices children develop their own thinking and encounter new ideas.

What Supporting Learning means

This Commitment places people firmly before equipment in the learning process by aligning relationships with children’s learning.

‘Support’ is a broad term that includes assisting, responding and reciprocating. Its inclusion in the Principle denotes the all-embracing care, attentiveness and interaction that cushions and facilitates early learning. Teaching belongs within this broad notion of support. The term ‘scaffolding’ is often used to describe the manageable steps, support and encouragement that adults give to help children to learn something new.

Teaching children effectively depends upon detailed knowledge of each child: their personal characteristics, needs and interests. In good relationships people interact easily, get to know each other well and are sensitive to each other’s needs. Such knowledge of individual children underpins successful support. Getting to know each child involves observing, listening and assessing what a child knows, can do and might go on to learn next. It also involves relating well to parents, who know their children best of all, and to other professionals who may be working with children.

The reference to ‘knowledgeable adults’ also highlights that those working with babies and young children must also understand how children develop and learn through all areas of Learning and Development in the EYFS.

Why Supporting Learning is important

Adult support in the EYFS must achieve a balance between scope for independent learning, timely guidance and ongoing reassurance and encouragement to enable young children to feel secure, valued and individually well cared-for. Babies and children depend upon the security that adult support brings, to explore and investigate places, things and situations. They often want adults to watch or be nearby during their play.

Children learn best through their positive interactions with people who know and relate to them well. Babies and young children are highly interested in people: they learn about the situations and things around them through their contact with significant people. When practitioners get to know children, through their good relations with them and their families, they use their growing knowledge of each child's characteristics, family life, culture and interests to support their learning. This helps adults to make suggestions and guide children as they interact, without undermining children's confidence in their own skills and abilities. When adults interact with children in this way they provide them with a sturdy and reassuring framework within which they delight in learning. It is through such interactions that children learn about themselves, who they are and what they want to achieve.

It is often difficult to 'read' the expressions and responses of a child who is finding it difficult to communicate. This means adults have to make interaction work by finding ways to support communication and interaction, for example, by using pictures, symbols or toys.

Listening to children helps practitioners to tune in to the ways in which children make themselves understood and is the basis for developing communication and relationships. Support for children's learning depends upon watching, listening and carefully assessing what a child is thinking about and is interested in. Learning about children's thinking in this way enables practitioners to adapt and develop their plans to incorporate children's ideas. This must be the basis of teaching if it is to assist and extend children's enquiries effectively.

Practitioners should also place great store on listening to what parents say about their children's needs and how they make themselves understood, for example, a toddler offering a cloth when they want to play peek-a-boo. If adults do not listen to children and their families they are in danger of being unresponsive to children's needs and of presenting children with activities that are outside their experience. In such circumstances children struggle to find significance and can become anxious. Listening to children enables practitioners to understand and create meaningful activities that help them to make connections and tackle new ideas. When they have grasped these, adults can encourage children to use them in different situations so that their understanding goes beyond any particular context.

Babies and young children are keen and able learners but they do not learn in a vacuum: they rely on adults to stimulate, sustain and extend their learning. A key goal of those caring for and teaching young children is to create the optimum conditions for learning to occur and this depends on understanding what and how children might learn best. Observing, enabling and facilitating are the key ingredients of teaching in the EYFS identified by SPEEL (DfES, 2002). It is by following this sequence that we can systematically help children to learn. Observing what children choose, can do and know enables practitioners to adapt the learning experiences that they have planned to the particular needs of individual children. In this way learning is made personally meaningful and children are helped to make connections in their learning.

When children get to know practitioners, they trust and rely upon them to support, encourage and 'feed' their investigations. If adults try to direct children's spontaneous play, by telling them what and how to do things, they often lose interest. Babies and young children have their own ideas about what they want to do and find out. They pursue their chosen lines of enquiry with passion and determination. Yet play can become stale and repetitive without adult contributions. To teach successfully practitioners must understand what is to be taught and find ways of setting new challenges within recognisable contexts, for example, creating spaces for three big elephants and ten zebras in small-scale jungle play leads children to puzzle out which fits where, and may later lead to counting and calculating to see how many are in the correct place and how many are still at large.

Bringing together knowledge about individual children and knowledge about what they can learn enables practitioners to plan and provide for the next steps in learning. By being knowledgeable about early development and learning, practitioners can be alert to the importance of valuing and extending children's spontaneous play, respecting that babies and young children are strong, able and independent characters in the learning relationship. Through play in which they take the lead and make choices, children develop their own thinking and encounter new ideas. They strive to make sense of how things work in their world and are keen to manage it for themselves.

Where there are good relationships with babies, adults know just the right thing to engage them in play, for instance with sounds, gestures, movement or objects. Similarly, supporting and developing the play of older children involves responsiveness to each child's cues. This enables practitioners to judge when to contribute to their play and when they are ready to be taught new skills. Within the security of a firm relationship, children relish being in control and acquire a sense of autonomy in learning.

Effective teaching also involves evaluating whether children are learning as well as they could and using the outcomes of these evaluations to improve children's learning further.

Effective practice in relation to Supporting Learning

Positive interactions

- Support and extend children's spontaneous play by building on what they do through sensitive encouragement.
- Provide social experiences and opportunities for children to talk about their experiences and ideas. Conversation, questions with alternative answers and thinking out loud are important tools in developing vocabulary and challenging thinking. Encouraging children to reflect on and tell others what they have been doing helps them to refine and develop their thinking.
- Promote autonomy and a disposition to learning by encouraging children to make choices and to think for themselves.
- Establish close relationships with children so as to engender the easy exchange of ideas that stimulates enquiry and enables you to sustain and develop children's thinking.
- Give children whose home language is not English opportunities to use and develop their home language in their play and learning, as well as providing activities where they can learn to talk in English.
- Parents who are anxious that their baby is 'difficult' can develop anxieties and uncertainties that affect relationships at home and in the setting. Listen to and accept the parents' concerns, compare notes about where and when difficulties occur and share ways of calming, soothing and sustaining effective interaction.

Listening to children

- Babies, very young children and those with speech or other developmental delay or disability may not say anything verbally, though they may communicate a great deal in other ways.
- Observe and listen closely to children so that you can identify their needs, capabilities and interests. Use this knowledge to decide what comes next and plan activities that will promote their progress in all areas of Learning and Development.
- Listen and build trusting relationships with children and their parents, incorporate their views into assessments and plan for the next steps in children's learning.

- Liaise with and listen to professionals from other agencies, such as local health services, so that you can understand the perspectives of others on children's special needs. Use what you find out to develop children's self-esteem and provide the best learning opportunities for children with special needs.

Effective teaching

- Use your knowledge of the EYFS to provide rich sensory experiences that stimulate curiosity and investigation and enable children to make progress in all areas of Learning and Development.
- Help children to feel secure and confident to tackle new challenges by building on what they already know and can do.
- Help children to make sense of their experiences by providing a commentary on what they do and are achieving.
- Be clear about the purposes of play and other activities. Provide well-planned play experiences that catch children's interest and through which they can make progress and achieve things.
- Value children's spontaneous play and make effective use of unexpected opportunities for children's learning that arise from their play, everyday events and routines.
- Provide activities that engage the children's interests to motivate them and sustain their learning, for example, by setting up role-play areas that reflect the children's current interests or putting appropriate models in the sand tray to enable them to take their interests to a further level.
- Achieve a balance between child-initiated spontaneous play and activities that adults initiate and guide.
- Evaluate your provision in relation to children's choices and achievements, so that you can find out if activities are enabling all children to make as much progress as they could.

References

DfES (2002) *Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL)*, HMSO, Norwich.

Further resources

Lancaster, Y.P. and Broadbent, V. (2003) *Listening to Young Children*, Open University Press, Maidenhead.

QCA (2005) *Continuing the Learning Journey: INSET package*, QCA, London (ref. QCA/05/1590).