Prime and Specific Areas of Learning and Development

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Annex 9: Detailed rationale for the prime and specific areas of learning

Rearticulating the areas of learning and development to highlight the centrality of personal, social and emotional development, communication and language and physical development is supported by a review of recent research (Angelou et al 2009), and is intended to better describe the nature of children's fundamental development in interconnected domains. Essentially, children are primed to encounter their environment through relating to and communicating with others, and engaging physically in their experiences.

It is widely agreed by researchers and practitioners that personal, social, and emotional development, physical development, and communication and language are closely linked to one another and are central to all other areas of learning and development. These three interdependent areas represent the earliest stages of development, which begin before birth and continue to occur within the early years when the developing brain has a maximum predisposition for learning.

The distinction between development and learning has engendered many debates. However, Siegel (1999) points out that 'a large number of studies have now clarified this issue and that development should be regarded as the outcome of the impact of experience on inborn genetic potential' (David et al 2003).Therefore these prime areas have been selected to reflect the beginnings of child development since they are critical for influencing later success in life (and learning) and largely transcend cultural differences, emerging as an outcome of early experience.

The identification of these areas as fundamentally important is supported by respondents to the EYFS Review call for evidence. Many respondents supported a focus on personal, social and emotional development (89% of practitioners, 81% of parents) and communication skills (85% of practitioners, 68% of parents) as the bedrock on which everything else is built. Physical development was cited by 40% of respondents as the third most important assessment area after personal, social and emotional development and communication, language and literacy. Many thought physical development was underemphasised particularly for children from birth to 22 months, and was important because of the health aspect. Respondents mentioned that children needed a great deal of support in physical development to develop skills, including motor control for writing and being able to dress themselves as they develop independence.

Focusing on these prime areas has the potential to bring together health and early years practitioners around a shared model of a child's development and would lead to joint ownership of children's outcomes.

The following paragraphs set out the detailed rationale for the prime and specific areas of learning – the rationale underpinning the aspects of learning is set out in Annex 10.

Personal, social and emotional development

Personal, social and emotional development are three building blocks of future success in life:

- *Personal development* (being me) – how we come to understand who we are and what we can do
- *Social development* (being social) – how we come to understand ourselves in relation to others, how we make friends, understand the rules of society and behave towards others
- *Emotional development* (having feelings) – how we come to understand our own and others' feelings and develop our ability to 'stand in someone else's shoes' and see things from their point of view, referred to as empathy

Starting the process of successful personal, social and emotional development is essential for young children in all aspects of their lives. It helps them to relate well to other children and adults; to make friends and get on with others; to feel secure and valued; to explore and learn confidently; and ultimately to feel good about themselves. Early personal, social and emotional development has a central impact on later wellbeing, learning, achievement and economic circumstances.

There is a biological basis to a child's engagement with others; infants are highly attuned to making contact with those around them, and the nature of the interactions has profound effects on the developing brain (Meltzoff, 2004, Gopnick et al, 1999). Inborn characteristics include temperament, which is affected by the quality of interactions in the process of social development. Babies are vulnerable and totally dependent on others for survival. When they learn that they can depend on and trust one person (usually, but not always, their mother) who is consistently responsive and sensitive to their physical and emotional needs they have what is called a secure attachment.

The quality and security of attachments experienced by a young child can impact on her/ his wellbeing either positively or negatively, and a secure attachment can enhance early conscience development, emotional understanding, pro-social understanding and self-regulation. This supports resilience and provides a strong defence against vulnerability. Conversely, children classified as having disorganised/disorientated attachments have been found to have 'substantial problems at school, show extreme levels of aggression and (be) more likely to express substantial fear and dysphoria/ miserable-ness' (Svanberg, P.O, PPT presentation, 2010). In this area, the nature of a child's relationship with a key person in early years settings is crucial: 'children's development is influenced by rich relational experiences that take place both at home and at settings', with research identifying key facets of warmth, contingency, use of talk, recognition of the uniqueness and agency of the child, and mutually responsive relationships (Evangelou, 2009: p76).

Communication and language

As with personal, social and emotional development, babies demonstrate from birth abilities and interest in communicating and depend on interactions with others in order to become confident and effective language users. 'Babies are born as curious learners with finely-tuned brains to attend to sounds around them, and process them as part of their developing understanding of the world.' (Angelou, 2009: p26). From the earliest sensitivities to language, 'All over the world, children begin to acquire language in similar ways as they construct representations of the sounds they hear' (Hoff, 2005).Within the first three years of life, children have laid the groundwork to becoming proficient in language which is the core of their communication with others, and also begins to guide and support their thinking (Angelou, 2009: p25).

Physical development

Children develop physical abilities in a predictable order; these emerging abilities are dependent on experience to become manifest and refined. This is a prime area of learning and development because children engage with the world, supporting all their learning, through movement and physical sensations. In early stages of development all information received is through touch, movement and the senses. As young children begin to develop concepts they define these in terms of movement and space, using schema to repeat and test ideas. Through physical play children discover and practise skills of co-ordination, control, manipulation and movement, a process which may be restricted in childrearing practices using equipment to support and restrain babies and young children. Children need to be supported in developing an understanding of the importance of physical activity and making healthy choices in relation to food. Sedentary lifestyles at home and in early years settings can also interfere with optimal physical development, and lead to child health issues along with safety concerns through limiting children's experience of understanding and managing risk through lively physical play.

The relationship between the prime areas

The prime areas of learning and development are integrally connected to each other:

- Personal, social and emotional development supports physical development as a child who feels secure and safe is confident to expand the boundaries of exploration and is motivated to reach, move and test physical capacities; it supports communication and language within relationships which establish turn-taking, joint activity, a desire to communicate and understanding of shared meanings of words;
- Communication and language supports personal, social and emotional development because a child who can communicate feelings, needs and ideas develops a strong sense of self, and is increasingly able to relate to others in rewarding and appropriate ways; it supports physical development through description of actions which increase conscious control and through talk about health and the factors which influence this; and
- Physical development supports personal, social and emotional development as increasing physical control provides experiences of the self as an active agent in the environment, promoting growth in confidence and awareness of control; it supports communication and language because a child who can effectively use large movements, gestures and the fine movements involved in speech is able to convey messages to others.

Extending the prime – the specific areas

Outlining areas of learning and development in a structured framework supports practitioners and parents in understanding the breadth and range of development for each individual child. It is nonetheless important to recall the holistic nature of children's development which occurs across domains 'as complementary and interconnected rather than in isolation' (Evangelou, 2009: p14).The prime areas of learning and development have been described as those which arise universally from the interaction of innate developmental patterns with experiences. These prime areas are fundamental to children's experiences in the specific areas. Children engage in activities which support their learning in specific areas by using their physical, communicative and social abilities, so that in the early years the prime areas are inseparable from all experiences.

The EYFS themes of positive relationships and enabling environments unify the optimal support for children's development across all areas, as there is a 'striking overlap between findings

across domains, especially as they relate to the supportive processes for development, e.g. ‘contingent responding to children’s actions that is attuned to the individuality of the child’ (Evangelou, 2009: p4).

The specific areas provide a context for building on early development and learning beyond the prime areas. The specific areas are dependent on the prime areas and cannot be encountered in isolation from communication and language, personal, social and emotional development, and physical development, since the child is always experiencing the world through emotions, communication and physical and sensory involvement. Literacy, mathematics, understanding the world, and expressive arts and design are areas of learning that support young children’s interest in the world around them and occur most commonly in adult-framed contexts. These specific areas of learning are influenced by the times we live in and societal beliefs about what is important for children to learn. There are three key differences between the prime and the specific areas of learning which are set out in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Key differences between the prime and the specific areas.

Prime	Specific
Are time-sensitive. If not securely in place by the age of 5, they will be more difficult to acquire and their absence may hold the child back in other areas of learning.	Are less time-sensitive. Specific areas of learning reflect cultural knowledge and accumulated understanding. It is possible to acquire these bodies of knowledge at various stages through life.
Are characterised by their universality. They occur in all socio-cultural contexts.	Are skills and knowledge which are specific to priorities within socio-cultural contexts.
Are not dependent on the specific areas of learning, although the specific areas of learning provide the context for their development.	Are dependent on learning in the prime areas – the specific learning cannot easily take place without the prime.

It is important to note, however, that the prime and specific areas are not conceptualised as ‘first one, then the other’. The relationship between the prime and specific areas of learning is not chronological but symbiotic; the prime areas are necessary but not sufficient. Development does not occur in one domain at a time, but holistically; for example, when babies and children are learning to manipulate objects they are at the same time acquiring basic mathematical concepts such as ‘one’ or ‘more’. They are learning to talk at the same time as they are becoming literate through listening to stories, making marks and engaging with books. Therefore, although development at the very earliest stages may lie predominantly within the prime areas, foundations are being laid within the specific areas of learning. Experiences in specific areas contribute to the prime areas from infancy onwards, just as the prime areas underpin the specific areas.

Hall’s (2005) distinction between experience expectant and experience dependent learning is useful in explaining the positioning of personal, social and emotional development, communication and language and physical development as prime areas, and expressive arts and design, mathematics, literacy and understanding the world as specific areas.

Experience expectant learning (prime)

Development in the prime areas emerges through the interaction of genetic potential and experience, as the brain develops connections from the very earliest interactions which children

have with their carers and their environment. The prime areas lie within a category which neuroscientists have described as ‘experience expectant’ learning.

‘Experience expectant’ learning has been conditioned by our evolutionary development and is where the brain expects certain kinds of input (e.g. Visual, tactile or auditory stimulus) to which it will adapt itself. It is a response to our environment which allows the brain to fine-tune itself, and it may be subject to ‘sensitive periods’ when the brain is particularly ready to respond to these stimuli, which are ever-present in the environment. (Hall, 2005)

Experience dependent learning (specific)

‘Experience Dependent’ learning does not have these constraints. It is the type of learning which will only occur if the need arises for it, and tends to be of the sort which features in culturally transmitted knowledge systems. The development of speech is ‘experience expectant’ in that we all have an evolutionary imperative to learn to communicate by speech, and tend to do so at a particular stage of childhood; but learning to read is culturally determined, ‘experience dependent’, learning, which will not happen by itself, demands training, and results from cultural and social necessity.’ (Hall, 2005)

The specific areas of learning, then, are those which can be thought of as ‘experience dependent’ and are those where the social and cultural context of children’s development is particularly influential. This theoretical conception is further supported in discussion of the work of Vygotsky, ‘whose ‘socio-constructivist’ account of learning describes the influence of the social context on learning’ (Evangelou et al p. 12). According to this account children’s learning and development is spurred beyond prime areas, which are genetically triggered, through the support of adults to encounter and use cultural ‘tools for thinking’ which include systems of symbolically representing concepts such as written language, numbers and maps. Whereas the prime areas are universal to all societies, other cognitive tools are determined by their usefulness in a particular society which changes as it develops over time.

Communication, language and literacy: the case for two areas instead of one

The model separates out literacy (reading and writing) from communication and language. Whilst speaking, listening, reading and writing are four interdependent strands (Rose Review, 2006) the development of communication and language skills happens during an optimum window of brain development and is experience expectant (and therefore forms part of the prime), whereas the acquisition of literacy skills is experience dependent since it can occur at any point in childhood or in adulthood. Becoming literate is culturally constrained and relies on learning a body of knowledge including the alphabetic code (i.e. the teaching of systematic synthetic phonics) in the same way that the learning of mathematics largely relies on securing knowledge and understanding of symbolic representation for number. However the structure of the new model does not imply that literacy in its broadest sense should be left to later stages of the EYFS. Babies and very young children enjoy sharing books and mark-making begins at a very young age; these skills need to be fostered from infancy in a climate of talk about reading and writing as a child becomes increasingly aware of the importance of words and letters.