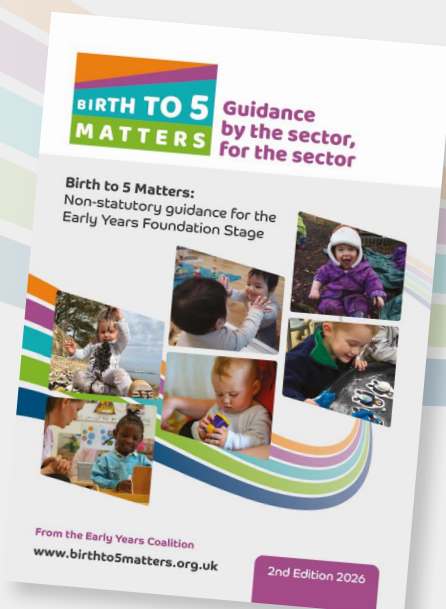




**Non-statutory
guidance for
the Early Years
Foundation Stage**



Senior school leaders: What you need to know about Birth to 5 Matters

Birth to 5 Matters (Bto5M) is non-statutory guidance, offering comprehensive support for educators to implement the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

It is principled and evidence-based, designed to support all early years staff including those working in schools and those who lead and manage them. It was produced by the Early Years Coalition of 16 early years sector organisations, with extensive input from experts, researchers and educators.

The updated second edition was published in July 2026 and is available in [hard copy](https://birthto5matters.org.uk/). It is also web-based (<https://birthto5matters.org.uk/>), with a whole suite of useful online resources linked to every section.

Why you need to know about Bto5M

Leaders play a critical role in setting goals, creating change and inspiring your team to provide the best possible education and care for the children in your school – in the EYFS, as well as in other phases of education. As a school leader, your understanding of the unique nature and significance of this phase matters in terms of what best practice looks like, as well as the evidence behind it and why it is crucial that we get it right for every child in every early years class.

This guide to Bto5M is designed to provide you with an overview to help you understand the basics of the EYFS approach and how best to support those working with the youngest children.

Leaders help build the foundations of highest quality provision for children

The introductory section of Birth to 5 Matters provides guidance on the groundwork for early years practice that makes a difference – laying the crucial foundations which support children to flourish in their wellbeing, development and learning. Each entry can be used to inform and support school improvement.



Why early years matters

The early years are a unique phase of development, underpinning and shaping everything that follows.

The Early Years **Foundation** Stage is well-named – how children develop and learn from their earliest experiences has a profound and lasting impact on their continued progress. **The quality of children's early education affects their attainment throughout school, their personal and social lives, their physical and mental wellbeing and their future success.**

90% of a child's brain develops by age 5.

In the first 5 years of life, a child's brain develops more rapidly than at any other point. A baby is born with all of the brain cells they'll have for the rest of their life, but what matters are the connections that form between the neurons. Wiring the brain is crucial to allow us to move, think, understand emotions and communicate. **In the early years the connections are built with astonishing speed – at least one million new neural connections every second, far more than at any other time in life.**

But it's a case of "use it or lose it".

From about age 3 onwards, the brain becomes more efficient by pruning away connections that have had little use. **That is why regular, consistently rich and emotionally supportive experiences are crucial to embed the positive brain structures that will last a lifetime.**



Important aspects of brain development are time-sensitive.

A baby and young child's brain is primed for crucial elements of human development, with the connections forming readily in the early sensitive period of brain development. During this sensitive period, the **prime areas of learning and development in the EYFS** are:

- Personal, social and emotional development
- Communication and language
- Physical development.

These areas encompass many crucial higher-level abilities including motivation, emotional self-regulation, problem-solving and communication. If these areas are not prioritised from birth to 5, it can be very difficult to build them later on.

EYFS Areas of Learning and Development –

and the holistic interconnections between areas

Prime areas – time-sensitive in brain development

- [Personal, Social and Emotional Development](#)
- [Communication and Language](#)
- [Physical Development](#)

Specific areas – not time-sensitive in brain development, but involve crucial shared cultural tools and knowledge

- [Literacy](#)
- [Mathematics](#)
- [Understanding the World](#)
- [Expressive Arts and Design](#)

For a young child, experiences are not split into learning areas. The Prime areas are always in action, and the Specific areas provide contexts for holistic development.

Birth to 5 Matters supports your team in planning an environment and day-to-day opportunities that support learning across all seven areas of learning and development as well as the [Characteristics of Effective Learning](#), building a strong foundation for continued progress in Key Stages 1 and 2.

“The prime areas of learning are vital for all babies and young children because they underpin all later learning.”

“The decisions that managers and leaders take are important. By prioritising the prime areas in their curriculum thinking, and allocating sufficient time and resources, they can ensure that children get the best start to their early education.”

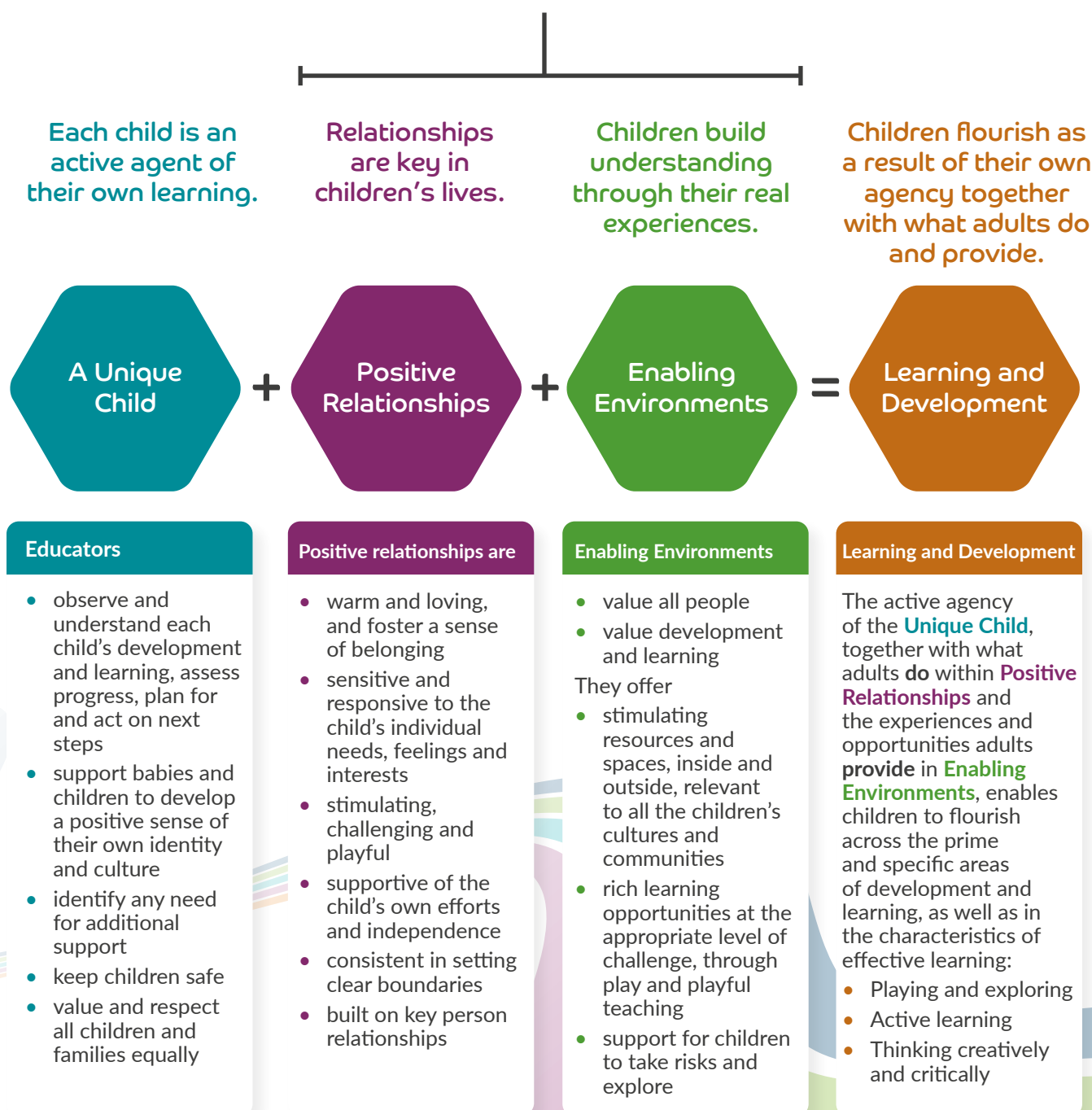
[Ofsted, Best start in life part 2: the 3 prime areas of learning - GOV.UK](#)



Birth to 5 Matters provides **detailed guidance** on how educators can be most effective through the four statutory EYFS principles:

A Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments, Learning and Development

The effective adult's toolbox



Birth to 5 Matters supports your staff with:

- **Child development**, developing and extending their understanding of how babies and young children grow and learn
- **Inclusive practice**, ensuring they meet the needs of all children
- **Learning through play**, supporting children to develop fundamental abilities that cannot be directly taught
- **Building learning capacities** through the **Characteristics of Effective Learning** – supporting positive habits of mind and dispositions such as curiosity, engagement, motivation, persistence, creative and critical thinking
- **Children's progression**, promoting development and learning across all areas, from babies through the EYFS and beyond

Birth to 5 Matters supports you to understand ways in which teaching in an early years classroom may look different from in primary classrooms – because learning in the early years is different.

Rather than formal teaching activities, it is the quality and richness of interactions and relationships which young children experience every day which best support their learning. Research consistently highlights the importance of responsive “serve and return” interactions between children and the adults who care for them, and the importance of real-life experiences that make sense to children.

A walk around a high-quality nursery or reception classroom or outdoor area may reveal children constructing elaborate models, negotiating in role play, mixing ingredients in the mud kitchen, revisiting a favourite story for the hundredth time, or engrossed in conversation with a skilled educator.

To the untrained eye this can sometimes look like “just play”. It might even look chaotic as children are spread around the space, some working alone, others with their peers and others with adults. **But to those who understand children and their development in those earliest years this shows learning at its very best.**



The key factors for leaders to focus on include:

- **Children's involvement and wellbeing** How engaged are the children and how do you know? Are they demonstrating intense focus, a furrowed brow, perhaps a tongue poking out? Are they confidently accessing their environment, selecting resources and making choices? The [Wellbeing and Involvement Scales](#) developed by Professor Ferre Laevers can be an impactful tool here to assess the quality of provision and its impact on children.
- **Where are the adults?** Are they difficult to spot as they are down at the children's level, highly engrossed in the hands-on activities?
- **What are the adults doing?** What body language can you see? Do the staff look genuinely interested and fascinated by the children? Are they listening carefully, following the children's lead in extended conversations – or, where children are not speaking, are they alongside, mirroring, narrating, demonstrating?

If you walk into an early years class and see these elements then be assured, brains are growing before your eyes.



This all-encompassing view of teaching is firmly aligned with Ofsted's definition of teaching in the early years, from their **Schools Inspection Toolkit**.

“Teaching is a broad term that covers the many different ways in which adults help young children learn. It includes their interactions with children during planned and child-initiated play and activities; communicating and modelling language; showing; explaining; demonstrating; exploring ideas; encouraging; questioning; recalling; providing a narrative for what they are doing; facilitating; and setting challenges. It takes account of the equipment that adults provide, the attention given to the physical environment, and the structure and routines of the day that establish expectations. Integral to teaching is how practitioners assess what children know, understand and can do, taking account of their interests and dispositions to learn (characteristics of effective learning), and using this information to plan children's next steps in learning and to monitor their progress.”

How Birth to 5 Matters can help your school

- **You can have confidence in the guidance**, which has been produced collaboratively by a large team of experts in each area. Every aspect is backed by up-to-date knowledge and research with further information and research available at <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/>
- **Birth to 5 Matters supports daily practice, and successful outcomes.**

For each area of learning and development, [detailed guidance](#) shows what learning and development looks like and how to support it – through the **formative process of observation-assessment-planning**.

Children's starting points are easily identified, with pointers for educators to support, challenge and extend at every step across the EYFS.

The guidance enables **early identification** where children may need additional or different approaches, leading to **appropriate intervention and improved outcomes**.

- **Summative assessment through best-fit Ranges enables you to track progress of individuals and cohorts.**

Using the Range descriptors as a whole avoids an unnecessary, time-consuming checklist approach. It helps to build confidence in educators' own knowledge of the children and professional judgements, and it is true to the vast variety of ways children will show their development and learning.

Children's progress over time can be seen as a continuum, both within a Range and between Ranges. **Understanding progress is not a matter of turning the complexity of a child's individual journey into a data point.** Between summative assessments, a child may move from one Range to another or instead may be progressing within a Range by expanding and deepening their learning.

Comparing best-fit summative judgements of Ranges with typical age links can help **identify whether children are roughly on track or are progressing more slowly or quickly.**

When compiled for groups of children, this **cohort information can be useful for leaders and managers in planning for the continual improvement of practice and provision in the setting.**



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www.birthto5matters.org.uk