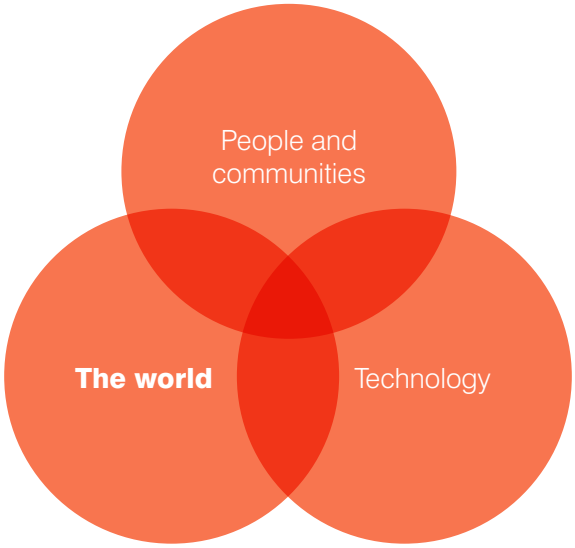
Understanding the World: The world

Introduction

Understanding the World (UW) is one of the ***four specific areas*** of learning in the EYFS framework. It involves guiding children to make sense of their physical world and their community through opportunities to explore, observe and find out about people, places, technology, and the environment.

In the EYFS framework, ***Understanding the World*** is made up of three aspects:



Prime and specific areas of learning

- The ***three prime areas*** of the EYFS are Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED), Physical Development (PD) AND Communication and Language (CL).
- The ***four specific areas*** are Literacy (L), Mathematics (M), Understanding the World (UW) and Expressive Arts and Design (EAD).
- The ***three prime areas*** should be the focus for practitioners working with the youngest children as these form the basis for successful learning and progress in the ***four specific areas***.
- As children become older, the emphasis will shift towards a more equal focus on ***all areas of learning*** as children's confidence and abilities increase.

Helping young children to learn about the world

Understanding the World covers most aspects of the area of learning and development which was called 'Knowledge and Understanding of the World' in the original EYFS framework.

The world covers aspects of the previous areas of 'Exploration and investigation' and 'Place.' It helps children know about similarities and differences in the world around them. They learn to make observations of animals

and plants, to explain why some things occur and to talk about how and why things change. It includes opportunities for experimentation.

Practitioners should create a stimulating environment which offers a range of activities which will encourage children's interest and curiosity both indoors and out of doors. They should plan activities based on first-hand experiences that encourage exploration, experimentation, observation, problem solving, prediction, critical thinking, decision making, and discussion.

Progress in UW: the world

Under threes

'Practitioners working with the youngest children should focus on the prime areas, but also recognise that the foundations of all areas of learning are laid from birth.'
[Tickell Review of the EYFS, 2011]

Early Learning Goal for The world

'Children know about similarities and differences in relation to places, objects, materials and living things. They talk about the features of their own immediate environment and how environments might vary from one another. They make observations of animals and plants and explain why some things occur, and talk about changes.'
[Statement from Draft EYFS Framework, 2011]

What quality looks like in practice

The following three scenarios describes how practitioners in a nursery on the outskirts of a market town support children's developing understanding of the world around them – the natural world and the physical world.

Under twos

In the nursery, practitioners working with children of all age groups place great value on the use of open-ended materials, natural and reclaimed, to encourage children to investigate, developing their curiosity, imagination and creativity. From the earliest age, the children spend long periods of time discovering the potential of open-ended materials – what they are and what they will do – encouraging them to build on their previous experiences of the world and how it works.

The baby and toddler rooms include a variety of resources which support the children's developing understanding of materials and how they behave. Treasure Basket collections are provided which encourage the youngest babies to handle large quantities of interesting objects made from natural materials. Smaller baskets contain handling collections of everyday items which the children explore and investigate using all their senses. The collections include kitchen utensils, balls, brushes, shiny things, or different fabrics for the babies to handle independently. The practitioners observe closely the ways in which individual children select and handle the items in the Treasure basket collections – how they select and discard objects, how they explore them using their senses, how they move them about, or how they look closely at how things work.

The older toddlers have access to a range of collections of reclaimed and natural resources to explore and think about. These include:

- A scented collection – sprigs of lavender, lemons or oranges, soaps, scented candles, herbs and empty perfume bottles.
- A natural collection – shells, large pebbles or polished stones, different sized pine cones, leaves of different shapes and sizes, large seed pods, conkers, driftwood, and pieces of tree bark.
- A materials collection – plastic cup, rubber ball, metal bowl, small china dish, paper plate, large pebble, driftwood, small offcuts of wood, a cork mat and a glass paperweight.

The practitioners take great care and pride in how they present the resources to the children using beautiful baskets and boxes for the collections.

Two- to three-year-olds

The practitioners working with the two- and three-year-olds also make good use of the potential of collections of everyday objects. By introducing a collection of shiny things for the children to explore, the practitioners begin to interest the children in finding out about reflections. A big shiny platter becomes a focus as the children place other shiny objects upon it, creating fascinating reflections to investigate. The discovery of the reflective effects of the concave and convex sides of a soup spoon by one of the children leads to the whole group developing fascinating ideas and theories about what they can see and why. The practitioners extend the children's scientific understanding by introducing small concave/ convex mirrors to enable the children to make connections in their learning. The practitioners place sheets of paper within the children's reach as they explore the shiny objects, encouraging them to record what they can see in the shiny surfaces.

The two- and three-year-olds enjoy gardening in part of the outdoor area which has been laid out with raised flower and vegetable beds made from wooden sleepers. This means that the beds are at a suitable height for the children to access as they enjoy digging and planting. All year round there are simple tools available which the children use effectively as they demonstrate their curiosity about the outdoor environment. One of the most popular tools with the two- and three-year-olds for exploring the paths and flowerbeds is always a stick!

Four- to five-year-olds

The practitioners who work with the oldest children in the nursery are very aware of the importance of building on the children's interests and fascinations. Understanding the world around us is a complex business and staff in the nursery know that many children possess sophisticated thinking skills and creativity which can be fostered by providing the time and space for children to explore in depth those things which fascinate them. Practitioners

take time to listen attentively to what the children have to say about their discoveries and they challenge children to reflect on, and explain, their ideas to encourage the development of higher level thinking skills.

The practitioners are also aware that the children, particularly the boys, are interested in investigating the world in ways which include an element of risk. They have adopted a risk/benefit approach to assessing the children's experiences, to help the children master the skills they need to manage risk and danger for themselves. As 'Understanding the World' is the area of learning in which boys often show most interest and have, in the past, excelled best in, the practitioners use this area of learning and development to also underpin the other areas of boys' learning. They provide activities, experiences and resources which will develop the boys' (and girls') science skills and knowledge – mechanisms and how things work, how things and people move, materials and how they behave, the effects of magnetism, light, electricity, sound, and weather.

The nursery has an 'outdoors in all weathers' policy which applies to the children of all age groups but particularly with the older children. They provide, and take responsibility for, protective clothing to enable children and adults to explore the natural world throughout the year. The positive attitude of the staff towards exploring out of doors fosters a sense of pleasure in the children as they make sense of their physical world. The outdoor area is seen as an environment for curiosity and the children are supported by the provision of a wide range of resources which enable them to further their knowledge about living things and their natural habitats. As part of the nursery's wildlife-friendly garden, both a log pile and a rotting tree trunk have been set up, providing a habitat – food, shelter and a breeding ground – for a wide range of small invertebrates.

Although the nursery has an outdoor area, the practitioners regularly take the children to the local park where they look closely at the trees and plants throughout the year, helping them to develop an understanding of how things change over time.

How to help young children learn about the world

Use these reflective questions to think about how you might support young children in learning about the world.

Under twos

- Are all staff confident in supporting children in their learning and development about the natural, physical, manufactured and technological world around them?
- Do all staff place great value on the use of open-ended materials – natural and reclaimed – to encourage children to investigate end develop their curiosity, creativity, and imagination?
- Are children given the time they need to discover the full potential of open-ended materials – what they are and what they will do?
- Could we provide a range of Treasure Box collections so that practitioners can observe the ways in which individual children select and handle the collections?
- Are we making the most of providing interesting objects for the children to explore using their developing manipulative skills, and skills of observation?
- Do we take care in how we present natural, reclaimed, and manmade resources to the children, making them look beautiful?
- What other collections could we provide to make sure that we appeal to individual children's learning preferences – collections of things which look, feel, sound and smell differently?
- How well do we communicate the message to parents that everyday objects are valuable 'toys' which encourage babies and toddlers to develop their curiosity and imagination?

Two- to three-year-olds

- Are all practitioners confident in their scientific knowledge of both the physical and the natural worlds?
- What can we do to help them improve their background knowledge?
- Is there continuity in the types of resources provided for the two- and three-year-olds, enabling them to build on their previous knowledge and experience?
- How skilled are we at recognising, and building on, the children's interests and fascinations?
- Do we have a good selection of equipment – such as magnifiers, mirrors, magnets, pulleys, torches, gardening tools – which will develop children's interest in the world and how it works?
- Does the outdoor area make provision for children of all ages to experience planting and growing flowers and vegetables?
- Do we have a wide range of good quality non-fiction books at an appropriate level to encourage the children to find out more about the world around them?
- Could we harness the interests of the children's family members to support our setting in this area of learning and development?

Four- to five-year-olds

- Do all staff recognise that understanding the world around us is a complex business and that children need time and space to explore in depth those things which interest and fascinate them?
- How well do we actively listen to what children have to say about their discoveries?
- Are all staff sufficiently confident and competent in this area of learning to challenge children to reflect on, and explain, their ideas to encourage the development of higher level thinking skills?
- Could we improve the way in which we provide activities, experiences and resources which will develop the boys' (and many girls') science skills and knowledge in ways which interest them – mechanisms and how things work, how things and people move, materials and how they behave, the effects of magnetism, light, electricity, sound, and weather?
- Would it improve the range of activities we provide for children as they investigate the world if we adopted a risk/benefit approach to assessing the experiences we provide for children?
- Do all practitioners have a positive attitude to exploring out of doors in all weathers?
- Could we develop a wildlife-friendly area of the outdoors to encourage children to investigate the natural world?
- How can we improve the way in which we explain to parents the value of having good conversations with their children, listening to what they have to say, encouraging them to ask questions, and exploring the world alongside them?

Ideas for parents

This area of learning and development covers how children learn about the natural, physical and technological worlds around them.

Helping your child to learn about the world

There are lots of easy ways you can help your child to learn more about the world.

You could use the ideas below as starting points to help you do this.

Under twos

- From the day they are born, children are actively exploring the world around them; being a good role model for curiosity is the most important thing for parents to do.
- Give your baby interesting everyday things to play with to encourage her to explore and investigate – try spoons, scarves, balls, brushes or shiny things.
- Encourage your child to explore the world using all of his senses – have fun guessing what covered up objects are by touching them, listening to them or smelling them.
- Give your child a small box or bucket of different pebbles, stones, shells, conkers or leaves to explore, to arrange in patterns and to sort and count.
- Use bath time as the perfect opportunity for your child to explore water – pouring from different containers and filling them again, squeezing water from a squeezy bottle, making bubbles, and sinking and floating with bath toys.
- When you go for a walk, show your baby or toddler buds and new shoots and show them how to touch them gently, as well as smelling flowers and blossom and listening to the birds.
- Put a mirror on the ground underneath a tree or plant in your garden and talk to your child about what you can see in the mirror – the leaves, the branches, and the sky.

Two- to three-year-olds

- Children of this age are very eager to explore the world around them by being curious about what they see, hear, and touch, and by asking questions. It is important that parents encourage this curiosity.
- When your child discovers things of interest try to explain the science behind her discoveries – for example, look into a soup spoon and notice the different reflections in the concave and convex sides of the spoon.
- If your child enjoys drawing and mark making, you could provide paper and crayons or a pencil for your child to draw what they have found out.
- Find some dandelion seed heads and blow the dandelion clocks for your child to watch, catch, and blow by himself.
- Give your child a small 'collector's bag' to talk with her to carry treasures you find when you go out for a walk.
- On a sunny day, in winter as well summer, go on a shadow hunt with your child – look at the shapes, sizes and positions of the shadows. Try to catch your shadow.
- When you are buying presents for your child, think about buying a wooden framed magnifying glass, a large horseshoe magnet or a bug collecting pot.

Four- to five-year-olds

- By the time your child is four or five he will have developed interests and fascinations which you could support to encourage his learning across all areas of learning and development.
- Listen carefully to what your child has to say when she discovers something of interest; try challenging her to explain her ideas to you as this will help her to develop her thinking skills.
- When you choose presents for your child, think about buying things which will develop his or her science skills – choose toys and games which show mechanisms and how things work, how living things and objects move and the effects of magnetism, light, electricity and sound.
- Try making a wildlife area in your garden or patio area to provide food, shelter, and a breeding ground for birds, snails, spiders, insects, and small invertebrates. Your child can then discover how a variety of things live and behave.
- After it has rained, investigate puddles near your home – look for reflections and watch how the puddles shrink as the water evaporates. You could also have fun splashing in the puddles!
- Help your child to plant a variety of seeds – flowers and vegetables – in your garden, hanging basket or window box. You can make growing beds using an old tyre, bucket, watering can, or wheelbarrow.
- You can grow cress in an indoor planter using half an egg shell. Paint a face on the egg shell, fill it with fine soil or seed compost, and sprinkle cress seeds into the shell. In a few days you will be able to watch the 'hair' grow and then enjoy eating the cress.