



Ways of Learning: Active learning

Introduction

The new EYFS framework is based on the findings of the Tickell review of the EYFS, published in spring 2011. This placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of practitioners recognising and understanding the ways in which young children learn in order to support them as effective learners. These characteristics of learning are an integral part of the three prime and four specific areas of learning, and describe the attitudes, skills, and approaches to learning which can be nurtured in the early years.

The characteristics of effective learning are:

- **Active learning** – children keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoy their achievements.
- **Playing and exploring** – children investigate and experience things, and ‘have a go’.
- **Creating and thinking critically** – children have and develop their own ideas, make links between ideas, and develop strategies for doing things.

These three learning characteristics describe learning *processes* rather than *outcomes*. This means that how a child exhibits these characteristics should be observed as part of the formative assessment process. This will help practitioners to understand the child better, and be more equipped to support his or her development as a learner.

Helping children to become effective lifelong learners

The structure and content of the EYFS framework is based on evidence from developmental psychology (Whitebread, 2012) which highlights the central role of self-regulation in the early years as one of the key determinants of academic success later in life. The concept of self-regulation includes:

- attitudes and dispositions for learning – the motivation, or ‘will’
- the ability to be aware of one’s own thinking – cognitive strategies, or ‘skill’.

According to theories of intrinsic motivation, ‘will’ arises naturally within a child, and is demonstrated by a natural, inherent drive to seek out challenges and new possibilities.

In support of this, the work of Carol Dweck and colleagues from Stanford University highlights the greater success of individuals whose motivation arises from a desire for mastery, rather than a desire for external reward. This is supported by Albert Bandura’s self-efficacy theory which highlights the value of individuals being able to:

- view challenging problems as tasks to be mastered
- develop a deeper interest in the activities they are involved in
- have a strong sense of commitment to their interests and activities
- recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments.

According to Bandura, our beliefs and attitudes supporting self-efficacy form in early childhood, highlighting the importance of fostering these characteristics in young children.

Active learning

Active learning focuses on a range of attitudes and dispositions that help to define a child’s motivation. It includes three key characteristics which demonstrate a child’s intrinsic **motivation** to achieve mastery – to experience competence, understanding, and autonomy.

- **Being involved and concentrating** describes the intensity of attention that arises when children concentrate on ideas and activities which interest them. Evidence shows that high levels of concentration and involvement lead to 'deep level learning'.
- **Keeping on trying** highlights the importance of persisting in the face of challenges or difficulties, thereby building up the disposition of resilience.
- **Enjoying achieving** what they set out to do refers to the reward children feel when they meet their own goals and build on the intrinsic motivation which supports long-term success, rather than relying on the approval of others.

Observing a child's Ways of Learning

Because it is not appropriate to specify particular ages or stages for the development of learning characteristics, or to use summative assessment to judge the extent to which they have been demonstrated, there are no early learning goals for the characteristics of learning. Instead, when completing the EYFS profile at the end of the foundation stage, practitioners are expected to comment on how individual children demonstrate these different characteristics.

Proposed addition to EYFS Profile (Tickell 2011)	
Learning characteristics	How [name of child] learns
By playing and exploring: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● finding out and exploring ● using what they know in their play ● being willing to have a go 	
Through active learning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● being involved and concentrating ● keeping on trying ● enjoying achieving what they set out to do 	
By creating and thinking critically: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● having their own ideas ● using what they already know to learn new things ● choosing ways to do things and finding new ways 	

Albert Bandura: <http://psychology.stanford.edu/abandura>

Carol Dweck: <http://psychology.stanford.edu/cdweck>

David Whitebread (2012) *Developmental Psychology and Early Childhood Education* SAGE Publishing.

Observing active learning in practice

When practitioners are observing how children involve themselves in **active learning**, they will be looking at how motivated they are through:

- being involved and concentrating
- keeping on trying
- enjoying achieving what they set out to do. [Tickell Review of the EYFS, 2011]

The following snapshot captures the activities and experiences which make up a typical morning in a setting catering for children from six months to five years of age.

During the session practitioners can observe different ways individual children engage in **active learning** as they encounter the world around them. These characteristics of effective learning, evident in children's experiences across all seven of the EYFS areas of learning and development, are highlighted below.

Enjoying a Treasure Basket

While four younger babies are having their afternoon rest, the practitioners prepare the room for a Treasure Basket session. The toys are cleared away and the Treasure Baskets are placed on separate rugs at either side of the room. When the babies have woken up and had a drink and a snack, they are eager and excited to explore the Treasure Basket collections. Two babies are placed beside each Treasure Basket and the practitioners sit back to observe what happens.

Each Treasure Basket contains a wide range of safe but interesting objects for the babies to explore. There are things made of wood, metal, fabric, and leather, which differ in texture, smell, sound, shape, size, and colour. There are natural materials, reclaimed objects, and interesting household objects, such as a pastry brush, a sponge, and a metal whisk.

Three of the babies have explored Treasure Baskets before and have their own favourite objects which they always look for. They spend time and effort digging through the basket to find what they are looking for and, when successful, are quick to show their pleasure. As there are over eighty different objects in the basket this can take some time, but they are happy to persist in their efforts until they are successful.

The practitioners observe and note the individual ways in which each baby explores. One of the girls enjoys emptying everything out of the basket and then playing with her favourite things – touching and mouthing them before waving them around. The little boy sitting next to her explores by picking objects up one at a time, looking carefully and manipulating them from hand to hand. A third baby chooses objects two at a time – one in each hand – comparing in her own way the properties of one with another. She enjoys banging things together to make a noise and laughs happily when her efforts are successful.

The Treasure Basket session lasts for nearly half an hour and only comes to an end when the babies show they are beginning to lose interest in the contents of the baskets. However, the practitioners are aware that these same babies will be fully engaged and interested again the next time the Treasure Baskets are brought out later in the week.

While the babies are exploring the Treasure Baskets, the practitioners will have opportunities to observe different aspects of the prime areas of learning – Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Physical Development and Communication and Language – as well as building their experience of materials and how they behave within Understanding the World.

*However, there will also be many opportunities to see how individual children approach **active learning** by noting how they:*

- *relax and enjoy the Treasure Basket experience, staying focused and engaged with what they are doing*
- *persist until they are able to find the things they particularly like in the basket*
- *show pleasure in their own achievements.*

Adventure stories

Towards the end of the morning, a group of three to four year olds are sitting outside in a quiet corner of the garden enjoying a story. A canopy strung between two trees, a waterproof rug, and several large cushions create a comfortable space to relax in. As well as bringing out several of their favourite books, the children also have with them an assorted collection of toy dinosaurs, farm animals, cars, and a helicopter. Several of the children are wearing hats, dresses, capes, and animal costumes from the role play box.

Today's choice of story, made after a discussion involving several individuals putting forward their ideas, is about an adventure in the jungle. The practitioner starts to read the story and the children look at the pictures. Very soon the children decide that they can improve on the story and begin to offer alternative scenarios. To make things more exciting, several children begin to act out the different events in their new adventure story.

The animals have to be saved from the flooding river by the helicopter swooping in and carrying them off to higher ground. Several of the children become 'nurses' and check the animals over to see if they have been injured. Superheroes are then called into action to help put out a fire in the forest and the animals have to be moved again, this time by car.

While this is going on, two of the children spend their time creating paddocks for the farm animals using a range of things they find around about them, including twigs, stones, and shells. They agree how many animals should go into each enclosure and move them there, counting them as they do so.

Two other children are using the cushions to build a den for the dinosaurs. This is made more difficult by all the other activity that is going on, but the children persist in their endeavours until they finally accomplish what they set out to do.

While the children are engaged in listening to and developing their stories, there are opportunities to observe some aspects of all the areas of learning – Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Physical Development, Communication and Language, Literacy, Mathematics, Understanding the World, and Expressive Arts and Design.

*However, there will also be many opportunities to see how individual children engage in **active learning** by noting how they:*

- *are motivated to share ideas and experiences*
- *become deeply involved in the things they are doing*
- *persist with what they are doing to solve problems and overcome challenges.*

Experiences with a tree trunk

A group of four year olds are playing outside in the garden where there is a large piece of wood from a fallen tree. Each of the children has his or her own way of engaging with the tree so several different things are happening at the same time.

Some of the children are pulling and poking at the bark to see what it feels like. They pick away at the bark until they are able to pull some pieces off, and then are interested in what it looks like and smells like. Some of the children are very persistent in their efforts to remove the bark. They move around to different parts of the tree trunk in an effort to find easy bits to remove. Soon there are several small piles of bark on the ground around the tree. They are delighted with their efforts and invite the practitioner over to admire what they have done.

The remaining bark is scooped up by two other children who delight in throwing it up in the air to see where it lands. They endeavour to catch it in their hands as it falls back down. They persist with this for some time until one child has the idea of using her coat to catch the pieces. Their play develops into a joyful cooperative activity involving piling pieces of bark onto a coat, holding on to the sides and flicking the bark upwards to see if they can catch it again.

While this has been going on three other children have been enjoying clambering on and off the tree trunk. Each

child has their own strategy for getting up and coming back down again.

One of the children is not interested in climbing or in stripping off the bark, but is fascinated by the woodlice and small snails that have appeared when the bark has been taken off. He spends his time sitting quietly on one side, looking carefully but not getting directly involved in what is going on.

While the children are involved in these experiences, the practitioner will be able to observe different aspects of Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Physical Development, Communication and Language, Understanding the World, and Expressive Arts and Design.

*However, there will also be many opportunities to see how individual children approach **active learning** by noting how they:*

- *are motivated to try things out and build on their own experiences*
- *stay focused and engaged for an extended period of time if an experience – such as picking at the bark – really interests them*
- *take pleasure in their own achievements and enjoy telling others about them.*

How to support young children's active learning

Being aware of the ways in which different children learn will help practitioners to support and extend the learning and development of each of the children they work with. Focusing on the characteristics of learning means being aware not just of **what** children are learning, but **how** they are learning.

The three characteristics of learning – playing and exploring, active learning and creating and thinking critically – are closely associated with one another. In any activity or experience that a child is engaged, he or she will often demonstrate attitudes or approaches associated with more than one way of learning. The scenarios described in the section *Observing active learning in practice* are a good example of this.

For all practitioners it is important to have a clear understanding of the different attributes associated with active learning in order to be able to recognise them more easily when observing young children's play. You will be looking at how motivated they are through:

- being involved and concentrating
- keeping on trying
- enjoying achieving what they set out to do.

Use the following questions to help you reflect on how well your setting supports young children's **active learning**.

- What further training do we need to organise so all members of staff fully understand the different characteristics of learning?
- How good are we at giving children the opportunity to follow their ideas during the course of a day, a week, or a longer period of time?
- Are our routines flexible enough to give children the opportunity to become fully engaged in what they are doing, or do we move them on too often?
- Do we create enough opportunities for children to encounter challenges and to solve their own problems?
- How well do we convey an ethos which values persistence and resilience?
- Are we all clear about how we acknowledge effort and 'keeping on trying' as a way of nurturing children's intrinsic motivation?
- Do we need to get rid of our system of rewards and stickers because it encourages children to rely on the approval of others?
- How could we organise more time for staff to observe individual children while they are playing?
- How do we demonstrate that we value and support individual children's ways of learning?
- Have we done enough to share with parents the importance of children being able to enjoy the satisfaction that comes from being able to say, 'I did that'?

Ideas for parents – how young children learn

Every child is unique and has his or her own way of exploring the world around them and the people in it. However, research with young children tells us that there are particular attitudes and approaches that will help young children to develop as successful learners in the early years, and later in life.

These can be grouped together under three headings:

- Playing and exploring
- Active learning
- Creating and thinking critically.

These describe **how** children are learning rather than **what** they are learning.

Playing and exploring is all about how children investigate and experience things, and ‘have a go’ for themselves.

Active learning describes the importance of children being encouraged to keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoying their achievements for their own sake, rather than to please anyone else.

Creating and thinking critically highlights the value of children having and developing their own ideas, making links between ideas, and developing their own ways of doing things.

Ideas to use

Try using some of these simple ideas with your child. The important thing to remember is that there is no right or wrong way to do things – instead you want to encourage your child to find things which interest them, try out their ideas, and enjoy the satisfaction of doing things for themselves.

- Put together a small collection of interesting things to explore. You could include a bunch of keys, a padlock, a short length of chain, several brushes of different shapes and sizes, a shiny bowl, a piece of fabric, an old mobile phone. Watch to see what your child does with them and all the surprising things they find to do with them.
- With your child, make up a collection of natural things – leaves, twigs, shells, pebbles, sand – to use for making patterns, building things with, and making houses and homes for toy animals, people and dinosaurs.
- Try creating a construction set using things like plastic bottles, short lengths of plastic pipe, pieces of wood, bark, short sticks, pieces of fabric, and cardboard. Building with this set will be an exciting challenge with lots of problems to solve and challenges to overcome.
- Out of doors is a great place to explore and build up physical skills such as jumping and climbing. Help your child to try things out, take on challenges, practice skills, and enjoy the satisfaction of achieving what they set out to do.