



# Ways of Learning: Playing and exploring

## 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:

- **Playing and exploring** – children investigate and experience things, and ‘have a go’.
- **Active learning** – children keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoy their achievements.
- **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.

## Playing and exploring

This characteristic of learning focuses on a children’s **engagement** – with the resources they use, the environment they are in, and the people around them. It emphasises the importance of children having opportunities to actively construct their own knowledge and understanding of the world through the many different experiences they have.

- Finding out and exploring is all about the open-ended, hands-on experiences which arise from children’s innate curiosity. These provide the multisensory experiences from which children build concepts, test their ideas, and find things out.
- Using what they know in their play highlights the importance of play as the context where children bring together their current understandings and combine, refine, and explore their ideas in imaginative ways.
- Being willing to have a go reinforces the role of play in enabling children to follow their interests and initiate activities. Through their play, children can seek challenges, develop a ‘can do’ attitude, be open to taking risks in new experiences, and develop an attitude that views failures not as setbacks, but as learning opportunities.

### 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
<p><b>By playing and exploring:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● finding out and exploring</li> <li>● using what they know in their play</li> <li>● being willing to have a go</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Through active learning:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● being involved and concentrating</li> <li>● keeping on trying</li> <li>● enjoying achieving what they set out to do</li> </ul>	
<p><b>By creating and thinking critically:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● having their own ideas</li> <li>● using what they already know to learn new things</li> <li>● choosing ways to do things and finding new ways</li> </ul>	

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 playing and exploring in practice

When practitioners are observing how children involve themselves in **playing and exploring**, they will be looking at how they become engaged in:

- finding out and exploring
- using what they know in their play
- being willing to have a go.

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 have the opportunity to observe the way individual children are **playing and exploring** as they encounter the world around them. These characteristics of effective learning, which are evident in the children's experiences across all of the EYFS areas of learning and development, are highlighted at the end of each section.

### Enjoying a Treasure Basket

While four younger babies are having their morning 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 to one side 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. For the fourth baby, the Treasure Basket experience is a new one. She touches the objects, moves things around and also watches what the baby beside her is doing.

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.

*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 **playing and exploring** by noting how they:*

- *engage with the Treasure Baskets*
- *follow their interests to explore the things which really interest them*
- *develop the confidence to try things out and have a go.*

### 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.

One of the children who has previously tended to hang back and not join in with free flowing activities of this sort carefully watches what the other children are doing. Eventually she comes up with her own idea about what could happen next in the story. This is actively taken up by the other children who begin to develop her idea to develop and extend their play.

*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 approach **playing and exploring** by noting how they:*

- *engage with different resources, people, and the environment to act out their stories*
- *follow their ideas to explore the things which really interest them*
- *develop the confidence to share their ideas with others.*

### **Experiences with a tree trunk**

A group of older 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 and smells like.

After some discussion, two of the children pick up handfuls of the bark pieces and take it over to the sand pit where they begin building with it. They poke the larger bits of bark into the sand and try to balance pieces on top to see if they can build a tower. As the children's play progresses they incorporate other things – small lengths of wood, plastic piping and upturned bucket – into their construction.

Meanwhile, 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.

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, with the more confident individuals seeking the practitioners help so they can jump down safely. One of the children who is more hesitant watches carefully to see what the others are doing and tries to copy the skills he sees them using.

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.

*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 **playing and exploring**, by noting how they:*

- *engage with the 'tree experience'*
- *follow their interests to explore the things which really interest them*
- *use their knowledge of similar experiences to extend their play and learning*
- *develop the confidence to try things out and have a go at jumping off the tree.*

## How to support young children playing and exploring

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 playing and exploring 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 playing and exploring in order to be able to recognise them more easily when observing young children's play. You will be looking at how they become engaged in:

- finding out and exploring
- using what they know in their play
- being willing to have a go.

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

- Do all members of staff understand what the different characteristics of learning are?
- In what way could we improve the range of resources we have, indoors and outdoors, so children have opportunities for more open ended multisensory experiences?
- Are our routines flexible enough to give children the opportunity to explore the resources and situations that interest them?
- How could we find more opportunities for staff to observe individual children in their play?
- How effective are we at planning new experiences for children based on what we know about how they like to learn?
- Do we all understand and support the setting's approach to helping children learn how to manage risks and challenges?
- How well do we support children to try things out and 'have a go'?
- How effective are we at creating a supportive emotional environment, where children feel comfortable to share their ideas?
- How do we demonstrate that we value and support individual children's ways of learning?
- In what ways could we help parents to understand more about the importance of children's play?

## 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.