

The Characteristics of Effective Learning (Development Matters 2023)

The Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning are divided into three sections. They're all inter-related and overlap with one another. You will recognise a lot of these characteristics in your children. Children will demonstrate each of them at some time if they are given the opportunities to do so.

Playing and exploring

Children will be learning to:

- realise that their actions have an effect on the world, so they want to keep repeating them
- plan and think ahead about how they will explore or play with objects
- guide their own thinking and actions by referring to visual aids or by talking to themselves while playing, for example, a child doing a jigsaw might whisper under their breath: "Where does that one go? – I need to find the big horse next."
- make independent choices
- bring their own interests and fascinations into early years settings - this helps them to develop their learning
- respond to new experiences that you bring to their attention

Examples of how to support this at home

Encourage babies' exploration of the world around them. Suggestions: investigating the feel of their key person's hair or reaching for a blanket in their cot.

Offer open-ended resources like large smooth shells and pebbles, blocks and lengths of fabric for babies and toddlers to play freely with, outdoors and inside.

When playing with blocks encourage children to discuss what they will make before and while making it, or draw a picture before building.

Visual aids can help children to keep track of what they need to do next, for example counting on their fingers or referring to a series of pictures on the wall to remind them what they must do before lunch.

Verbal mental aids include providing a sensitive commentary on what a child is doing. You might comment: "I see you are looking for the biggest pieces first" or ask "how well do you think that's going?"

Children may copy your commentary by talking out loud to themselves first. In time, this will develop into their 'inner voice'.

Provide a well-organised environment so that children know where materials and tools are and can access them easily.

Provide enough materials and arrange spaces so that children can collaborate and learn alongside peers. Give children enough time and space to engage in large-scale projects that may continue over several days.

Explore the reasons behind children's choices, for example, 'I'm interested that you're using a paintbrush rather than a pencil to make your picture.'

Extend children's interests by providing stimulating resources for them to play with, on their own and with peers, in response to their fascinations.

Join in with children's play and investigations, without taking over. Talk with them about what they are doing and what they are noticing.

Provide appropriate non-fiction books and links to information online to help them follow their interests.

Regularly provide new materials and interesting things for children to explore and investigate.

Introduce children to different styles of music and art. Give them the opportunity to observe changes in living things in the setting, and around the local environment. Take children to new places, like a local theatre, a museum, a National Trust heritage site, a fire station, a farm or an elderly people's home.

Involve children in making decisions about science experiments: what might we feed the plants to make them grow? Why do you think fizzy water might work? How will we know if one is growing faster than another?'

Active learning

Children will be learning to:

- participate in routines, such as going to their cot or mat when they want to sleep
- begin to predict sequences because they know routines, for example, they may anticipate lunch when they see the table is set, or get their coat when the door to the outdoor area opens
- show goal-directed behaviour, for example:
 - babies may pull themselves up by using the edges of a low table to reach for a toy on top of the table
 - toddlers might turn a storage box upside down so they can stand on it and reach up for an object
- begin to correct their mistakes themselves, for example, instead of using increasing force to push a puzzle piece into the slot, they try another piece to see if it will fit

- keep on trying when things are difficult

Examples of how to support this at home

Help babies, toddlers and young children feel safe, secure and treasured as individuals.

The key person approach gives children a secure base of care and affection, together with supportive routines. That can help them to explore and play confidently.

Provide furniture and boxes at the right height to encourage babies to pull themselves up and reach for objects.

Opportunities to play and explore freely, indoors and outside, are fun. They also help babies, toddlers and young children to develop their self-regulation as they enjoy hands-on learning and sometimes talk about what they are doing.

Help young children to develop by accepting the pace of their learning. Give them plenty of time to make connections and repeat activities.

Help children to think about what will support them most, taking care not to offer help too soon. The following strategies will help children at different times, depending on their confidence, how much previous experience they've had with an activity, and how motivated, or distracted, they are:

- repeating something hard on their own, learning through trial and error
- asking a friend or an adult for help
- watching an adult or another child, modelling what to do, or listening to their guidance

At times, children respond well to open-ended activities which they choose. Other times, they benefit from a supportive structure established by an adult. It is important to provide both kinds of opportunities.

Adults can teach children to use self-calming to help them deal with intense emotions. For example, you could introduce a 'calming jar'. Or you could introduce 'zones of regulation'. These can help children to become more aware of their emotions and think about how to calm themselves.

Creating and thinking critically

Children will be learning to:

- take part in simple pretend play, for example, they might use an object like a brush to pretend to brush their hair, or 'drink' from a pretend cup
- sort materials, for example, at tidy-up time, children know how to put different construction materials in separate baskets
- use pretend play to think beyond the 'here and now' and to understand another perspective, for example, a child role-playing the billy goats gruff

might suggest that "Maybe the troll is lonely and hungry? That's why he is fierce."

- know more, so feel confident about coming up with their own ideas
- make more links between those ideas
- concentrate on achieving something that's important to them - they are increasingly able to control their attention and ignore distractions

Children will also be learning to:

- review their progress as they try to achieve a goal and check how well they are doing
- solve real problems

For example, to share 9 strawberries between 3 friends, they might put one in front of each, then a second, and finally a third. Finally, they might check at the end that everyone has the same number of strawberries.

Examples of how to support this at home

Help babies, toddlers and young children to find their own ideas by providing open-ended resources that can be used in many ways.

Encourage, support and enjoy children's creative thinking as they find new ways to do things.

Children need consistent routines and plenty of time so that play is not constantly interrupted. It is important to be reflective and flexible.

Help children to extend their ideas through sustained discussion that goes beyond what they, and you, have noticed. Consider 'how' and 'why' things happen, and 'what might happen next.'

Help children to come up with their own ideas and explanations. For example, you could look together at woodlice and caterpillars outdoors with the magnifying app on a tablet. You could ask: "What's similar about caterpillars and other insects?" You could use and explain terms like 'antennae' and 'thorax'.

Offer children many different experiences and opportunities to play freely and to explore and investigate. Make time and space for children to become deeply involved in imaginative play, indoors and outside.

Help children to reflect on and talk about their learning through using photographs and learning journeys. Share in children's pride about their achievements and their enjoyment of special memories.

Suggestion: you could prompt a conversation with questions like: "Do you remember when...?", "How would you do that now?" or "I wonder what you were thinking then?"