



# Finding and exploring young children's fascinations

Strengthening the quality of gifted and talented provision in the early years





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# Introduction

*'Giving every single child the chance to be the best they can be, whatever their talent or background, is not the betrayal of excellence; it is the fulfilment of it.'*

**Personalised learning: Building a new relationship with schools** speech by David Miliband,  
Minister of State for School Standards, North of England Education Conference,  
Belfast (8 January, 2004)

A clear focus on personalisation lies at the heart of the national programme to improve gifted and talented (G&T) education across all phases. The key underlying principles are:

- developing effective pedagogy
- counteracting disadvantage
- preventing and addressing underachievement.

## This guidance

This guidance draws on current research evidence and practitioner case studies to explore how each child's unique strengths, interests, aptitudes and passions can be recognised, celebrated and nurtured in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The guidance argues that very young children often possess sophisticated thinking skills and creativity that may not be recognised or valued by adults, and may therefore pass unnoticed. Through posing questions for reflection and discussion on each of the four themes and principles of the EYFS, the guidance supports practitioners in taking responsibility for creating environments in which all children can discover and gain confidence in their own capacity for learning. It suggests that by working in close partnership with parents<sup>1</sup> and listening carefully to the voice of the child, practitioners will gain insights into children's emerging capabilities that could transform their future educational experience.

## Who is it for?

The guidance has been written primarily for:

- Early years practitioners and managers of early years settings in the maintained and non-maintained sectors, including children's centres, childminders and private, voluntary and independent settings.
- headteachers and G&T leading teachers in schools with early years provision, including Reception classes
- local authority early years teams
- local authority G&T leads.

## How to use the guidance

This guidance is intended as a resource for settings, schools and local authorities to use to support the development of appropriate and effective provision for gifted and talented children in the early Years.

It provides advice and support for all those who work with children in the early years by:

- indicating some key factors to consider when planning gifted and talented provision for very young children
- considering how effective provision is embedded within the four themes and principles of the EYFS

<sup>1</sup> The term 'parents' includes all significant carers, e.g. step-parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, grandparents.

- providing case studies and practical examples to show how some settings have approached this
- encouraging reflection upon current practice through key questions.

The guidance also provides links to the Institutional Quality Standards for Gifted and Talented Education (IQS), an audit tool designed to support self-evaluation and improvement in schools and settings. Appendix 1 shows specific links between the elements of the IQS and the EYFS.



## Why a focus on gifted and talented children in the early years?

The DCSF defines gifted and talented children as those

*'...with one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop those abilities)'*

### ***Identifying gifted and talented learners – getting started (DCSF, 2008)***

All children are entitled to provision that reflects their unique characteristics, fascinations and enthusiasms. It is important to identify all children's strengths and interests at every stage in their development to ensure that this entitlement is met. In the early years gifts and talents are more likely to be revealed when practitioners and parents work in close partnership, sharing observations and information about the children at home and at their setting or school. Observing and listening carefully to the voices of children will reveal insights into their learning and development that could never be captured through more formal assessment or tests. Children are developing more rapidly during the earliest years than at any other time in their lives, and gifts and talents may be transient at this stage. However, by tuning in early to the range of strengths, interests and passions of children as they begin to emerge, practitioners can gain an insight into their potential and plan opportunities that enable this to be celebrated and nurtured. This could transform the child's future educational experience.

The earliest years are a critically important time and practitioners have a responsibility to create environments in which young children's learning and development can flourish and their gifts and talents can be recognised, nurtured and extended.

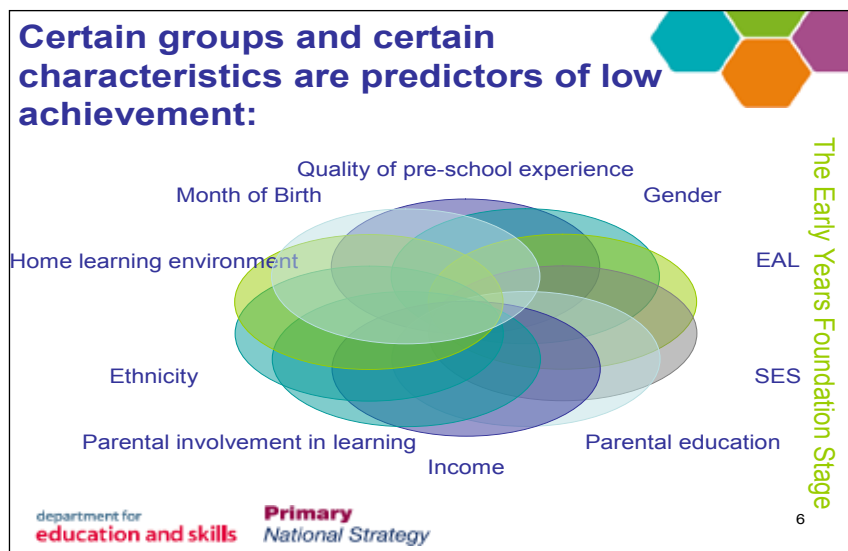
## Narrowing the gaps

*'...generations of low and middle-income young people will miss out unless we do more to close the educational attainment gap...For reasons of economic progress, we need a second wave of mobility. But, more than that, this is a question of basic justice. A talent unfulfilled is not just an opportunity cost. It is an opportunity lost.'*

**Alan Milburn MP, chair of the Government's panel on social mobility (July, 2009)**

Narrowing the gaps that exist in the achievement and development of some groups of children, including those who are, or who have the potential to be, G&T, is now a national priority.

Although nationally over 50 per cent of children currently achieve a good level of learning and development at the end of the EYFS children in some groups are over-represented in the lowest-achieving 20 per cent of children. The diagram that follows indicates some of the groups and characteristics which are predictors of low achievement. For example, more than 60 per cent of children in the lowest 20 per cent are boys.



Within the groups identified in the diagram above, there will be many children in the early years who have gifts and talents that are masked by developmental and cultural differences; as a consequence, their gifts and talents may pass unrecognised. Every practitioner therefore has a responsibility to be alert to the unique strengths, interests and capacities of every child in their setting, particularly those from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, in order to:

- address barriers to development
- provide access to an environment that will engage the children
- provide opportunities to extend their learning.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) research and the Millennium Cohort Study (2008) both show that gaps in development and achievement, linked to social and economic disadvantage, can be seen in children as young as 22 months. Furthermore, these gaps continue to widen as children move into Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2 and beyond.

However, a growing body of evidence is showing that access to high-quality provision for these children and their families can make a significant difference. A recent evaluation of the DCSF early education pilot for 2-year-olds (DCSF National Centre for Social Research, 2009) supports this. It reveals that children who were found places in relatively high-quality settings experienced real improvements in their language ability, equivalent to moving from the 34th to the 46th percentile for language development.



It is therefore particularly important that practitioners within the early years:

- provide rich opportunities for all children to find learning which inspires and engages
- identify and document evidence of children's particular interests and abilities
- plan experiences which can enrich and further develop children's interests, gifts and talents.

# Section 1 What does it mean to be gifted and talented in the early years?

*'If Billy Elliot is about one thing, it is that we are capable of making lives for ourselves which are full of joy and self-expression; while we might not all become ballet dancers, we are capable of finding moments of real profundity and creativity whatever our circumstances. But more than that, we have a duty to ourselves and each other to create a society where this possibility in all of us is nurtured and can flourish.'*

**Lee Hall, *Billy Elliot the Musical*, book and lyrics**

Mention the term 'gifted and talented' to an audience of early years practitioners and a lively debate is likely to ensue on the nature of intelligence and our construction of childhood. In the book *Learning without Limits* (Hart *et al*, 2004) we are urged to challenge a determinist view of ability that identifies a child as inherently 'more able' or 'less able' and to focus instead on recognising and developing every child's capacity for learning. In this view every child is seen as potentially '*a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured*' (EYFS Principle, The Strong Child).

The book affirms that teachers '*have the power to strengthen and, in time, transform learning capacity by acting systematically to lift limits on learning, to expand and enhance learning opportunities and to create conditions that encourage and empower young people to use the opportunities available to them more fully.*'

The gifted and talented e-learning Module 11: *Learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage* (go to [www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies](http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies) and search for *Learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage*) provides online CPD and resources for practitioners and leading teachers. It stresses the importance in the early years of:

- recognition that all children have strengths to build on
- recognition that the development of abilities and talents may be uneven and evolving
- provision which offers children very broad experiences rather than narrow pathways
- the role of the practitioner as a facilitator and 'scaffolder' of children's learning.

## The importance of mindsets

Children's learning capacity is powerfully affected by the beliefs that they hold about themselves as learners, and these beliefs are in part formed by the messages we may inadvertently and unconsciously be giving them. Learning is enhanced when children feel engaged, motivated, empowered and emotionally secure.

Dweck (2006) suggests that as soon as we are able to make judgements about ourselves as learners, we develop '*mindsets*' that either enhance or inhibit our capacity for learning. A '*growth mindset*' reflects the belief that we are active agents in the learning process with the ability to affect change, but learning may be limited by a '*fixed mindset*' where capacity for learning is perceived as static and unalterable, regardless of the effort we put in.

Dweck's research shows how '*the belief that cherished qualities can be developed creates a passion for learning*'. She found that learners of any age who believe that abilities can be cultivated and developed through effort and persistence, would:

- actively seek out new challenges
- welcome opportunities for intellectual development
- embrace problems and develop creative solutions
- welcome opportunities for collaborative learning.

She shows that the effect of these mindsets can be seen at an early age:

*'We offered four-year-olds a choice: they could redo an easy jigsaw, or they could try a harder one. Even at this tender age, children with the fixed mindset – the ones that believed in fixed traits – stuck with the safe one.'*

**(Dweck, 2006)**

It seems that self-esteem, in this mindset, is measured by traditional notions of success, so 'getting it right' becomes more important than 'having a go'. These children may have all sorts of gifts and talents, but will 'hide their light under a bushel' because they already see learning as a risky business. Although these children will achieve, we may never know their true capacity for learning – they have in effect set their own limits.

By contrast, 'children with the growth mindset – the ones who believed you could get smarter – thought that this was a strange choice' (Dweck). They wondered why anyone would want to do the same puzzle over and over again, and actively embraced the new, more challenging option.

The earliest years are therefore a critically important time when children are not only learning more rapidly than they will ever do again, but are also developing attitudes to learning and to themselves as learners that will limit or enhance their capacity for lifelong learning. Importantly, Dweck's research indicates that mindsets can be changed with relatively simple interventions that build children's confidence in learning how to learn.

### Questions for reflection

- What are the characteristics of gifted and talented children in your setting?
- How do you encourage and support children to become resilient, confident learners and to develop a positive 'mindset' towards challenges that all real learning brings?
- To what extent do you plan opportunities for children to work collaboratively on a shared challenge?

## Strengthening the link between home and setting

*'Pre-school children have brains that are literally more active, more connected and much more flexible than ours...by three the little child's brain is actually twice as active as an adult's.'*

**(Gopnik, 1999)**

We now know that we actually participate in building our own brains. From the very beginning, the brain develops in response to experience, and everything a baby sees, hears, touches, tastes and smells influences the way this happens. Experience determines which connections in the brain will be activated, and the connections that have been activated most frequently become stronger and are preserved. Those that are not used become weaker and eventually are lost.

The quality of the child's earliest experiences is therefore very important. Continuity of experience between home and setting is paramount, with parents and practitioners working together in genuine partnership to create an environment which is gentle, loving and rich in opportunities for new learning and development.

## A practitioner asks:

*A 3-year-old in my setting can read and her parents are keen that she gets lots of practice with me. What would you advise?*

The EYFS makes clear that relationships with parents should be respectful, and as a practitioner, you should always assume that what parents are telling you is correct unless there is firm evidence to the contrary. A relationship involving mistrust can never be a positive one. A positive way forward is to discuss and agree with the parents how to support the child. You may agree to encourage the child to practise reading when she is playing. This could be in a role-play about helping to treat the pets at the vets, or in the water area working out how to move the water from one container to another.

The following case study shows how one setting involved parents in their children's learning, supporting them in recognising how their children's abilities could emerge through a rich environment for learning. The study also indicates the importance of observing children's early interests, and building on these through developing a range of future possibilities to deepen learning for individual children.

## Case study: Parents as Partners in Early Learning

Staff at the nursery school had observed children playing with dinosaurs and noted that this interest had been sustained over many days. They decided to embark on a dinosaur project, to support and extend the children's passion and deepen their understanding. They also saw this as a real opportunity to involve the parents in their children's learning, and the project began by planning a visit to the Natural History Museum in London – an exciting prospect, as some of the parents had never been on a train before!

The aims of the project were to provide opportunities for:

- parents to observe their children playing
- parents to feel more confident about becoming actively involved in their children's learning
- time to talk – engaging staff and parents in conversations about learning
- practitioners to feel excited about working closely with parents in this and future projects.

Travel costs for the trip to London were funded from the Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) project, as were six digital cameras for use by the children and their families throughout the project. The children took ownership of the cameras in London and for the following nine weeks. The day in London was amazing for the children and the adults – the train journey, the busy streets, the size of the museum and the breathtaking dinosaurs.

The 3-year-olds stood confidently taking photographs with their cameras, pausing occasionally to review their shots and share them with their parents. Their confidence and competence took everyone by surprise, including members of the public.



Back at nursery the following day, the children were invited to share their photographs via a presentation to the whole group. Parents were invited to come along and then meet to discuss the learning so far. Staff and parents discussed the possible lines of direction for the project, based on the children's interests. Everyone felt that the cameras had really captured the children's imaginations – within a dinosaur context.

### Future possibilities

The following possibilities for the next nine weeks were agreed.

- Children and parents could browse through the children's photographs on the laptops to select, print and display the images in the children's journals.
- Adults and children could become involved in fact finding about dinosaurs – using non-fiction books and relevant websites.

Creative story making could be encouraged through imaginative play with the dinosaurs.

- Children and their parents could take photographs of the imaginative play to build into a story, either using PowerPoint or as a comic strip.
- Children and their parents could create short films about dinosaurs using digital cameras and simple editing software.



At the end of the project staff spent time with the parents to gather 'final thoughts' on all that had happened and the learning that had taken place. Parents really enjoyed the experience of being involved and comments included:

'It's been a lovely opportunity – not everyone gets the chance to do things like this,' and 'I've learned such a lot about how capable my child is.'

### And what was gained?

The children gained:

- new skills
- confidence
- competence
- independence
- closer relationships
- greater knowledge
- the ability to work collaboratively.

The parents gained:

- new skills
- confidence
- competence
- independence
- closer relationships
- greater knowledge
- the ability to work collaboratively.

The practitioners gained even closer working relationships with the children's parents and grandparents, valuing their crucial role in the learning process for all the nursery children. Working in true, respectful partnership with parents offers an insight into children's holistic life learning, that maximises their overall opportunities to succeed.



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## Finding the element

*'We need to create environments – in our schools, in our workplaces, and in our public offices – where every person is inspired to grow creatively ... We need to embrace the element ... The features are aptitude and passion. The conditions are attitude and opportunity.'*

**(Robinson and Aronica, 2009)**

When people are deeply and joyfully engaged in an experience or activity, we often say that they are 'in their element', but what does that really mean? Ken Robinson argues that when people are in their element 'they connect with something fundamental to their sense of identity, purpose and well being'. He stresses that the element is different for everyone but that it has two main features:

- aptitude – having a natural facility for something, either general or highly specific
- passion – taking a deep delight and pleasure in it.

He also identifies two key conditions:

- attitude – motivation and self-belief, perseverance, optimism, ambition
- opportunity – we may never discover our true element without the opportunities we have, the opportunities we or others create, and how and if we take them.

When children are in their element, they become active protagonists in their own learning, building confidence in themselves as learners and creative thinkers. This in turn strengthens their resilience and their ability to embrace the many changes they will inevitably face in their lives.

Practitioners therefore have a threefold responsibility:

- to recognise young children's unique aptitudes and passions which can be nurtured and developed
- to create environments of opportunity where children can discover aptitudes and passions that they did not know existed
- to provide the fertile ground where children's gifts and talents can flourish.

Through listening to young children, respecting their thoughts and feelings, sharing the joys of their discoveries and understanding their motivations, practitioners can create environments where each child's unique strengths, interests and fascinations can unfold.

### Questions for reflection

- How do you recognise when children are 'in their element'?
- How do you currently create an environment where children can discover what it is to be in their element? What are the key features that you need to provide within your setting?
- How might you provide further opportunities for this?

## Section 2 Gifted and talented children and creativity

*'The clue to gifts and talents in the early years may be more to do with creativity and the use of skills to do something unusual or unexpected.'*

**(DCSF, Pascal, 2009)**

Professor Christine Pascal suggests that in the early years gifts and talents can be transient and difficult to track, as the normative range at this age is so vast. Children may move ahead rapidly in one area of development and fall behind in another; then just as suddenly this pattern may be reversed. There are peaks and troughs and times when children appear to be standing still. In other words, learning and development in the early years is a complex process, requiring practitioners to be constantly alert to each child's unique pattern of learning and development. All children will have strengths that can be built on and effective provision for gifted and talented children will be good practice for all. But, given the complexities of early learning and development, how can gifts and talents be identified?

It is easy in the earliest years to confuse a child's 'advanced development' – children who perhaps are precocious and have mastered a skill early – with a child who has a specific aptitude or ability, the capacity to do what few children can do at any age.

There is a tendency to underestimate young children's capacity for learning – child development checklists cannot pick up the unique creativity that is a hallmark of gifted and talented children. Ongoing observational assessment across a range of contexts is the key to identifying children's gifts and talents in the early years, in close and genuine partnership with parents. However, gifts and talents can still be illusive since at this age, 'academic ability' often reveals itself through unusual or unexpected responses which can be overlooked or misunderstood by adults and sometimes mistaken for challenging behaviour.



© Preschools and Infant-toddler Centers – Istituzione of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Italy, published by Reggio Children, 2009



## Creative thinking and creative development

An understanding of creativity and creative development can help to shed light on what it is to be gifted and talented in the early years.

In the EYFS, creativity appears twice – as Creativity and Critical Thinking – one of the four commitments that sit under the theme Learning and Development, and then again as Creative Development – one of the six areas of Learning and Development (see diagram of the EYFS Themes and Commitments on p.14). Craft (2001, 2002) offers a distinction which is helpful here. She introduces the concept of 'big C' and 'little c' creativity. Creative Development would be defined as 'big C' creativity – the creativity that is manifested through the language of the arts – for example music, drama, role-play, dance, art, sculpture – reflecting the DCSF definition of 'talents'.

By contrast, Creativity and Critical Thinking represent the creativity that is in all of us – 'everyday creativity' as Craft calls it – the way we use our imagination and our thinking skills to make new connections in our learning and discover creative solutions. This 'little c' creativity may provide valuable insights into young children's giftedness as their thinking becomes more visible.

Creativity and critical thinking emerge as a result of the dynamic interplay between teacher and child in an enabling environment where children's contributions are highly valued and innovation is encouraged.

### Possibility thinking

Craft proposes the valuable notion of 'possibility thinking' (2000, 2001), recognising that problem finding and problem solving lie at the heart of the creative process. When young children are encouraged to think about what might be, instead of being asked 'what is', the sophistication of their thinking is often revealed.

Helpful 'possibility questions' might include these:

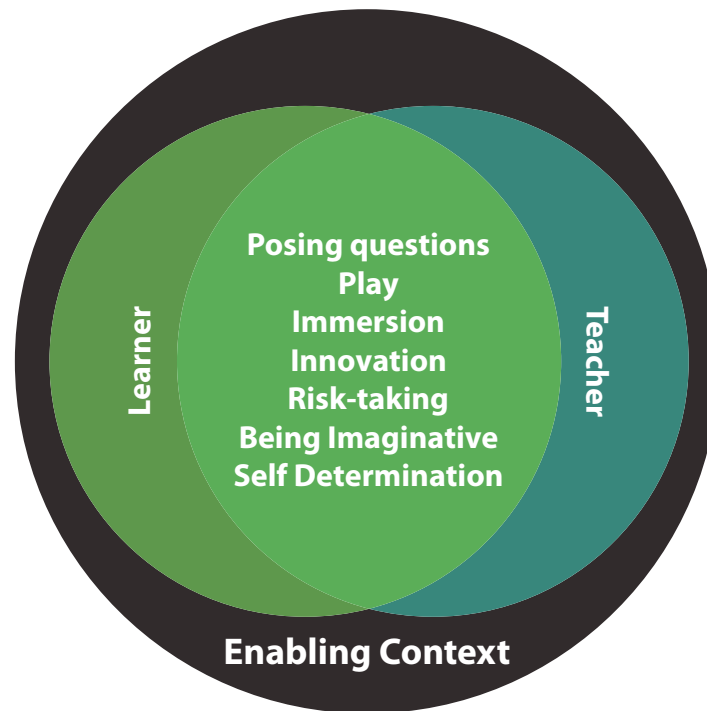
- What does that remind you of?
- What do you think might happen next?
- What do you/don't you like about this – why?
- Is there another way?
- How could we...?
- What might happen if...?
- What would you do if...?
- What do you think?



The Early Years Foundation Stage: Themes and Commitments			
A Unique Child	Positive Relationships	Enabling Environments	Learning and Development
<p><b>1.1 Child Development</b> Babies and children develop in individual ways and at varying rates. Every area of development – physical, cognitive, linguistic, spiritual, social and emotional – is equally important.</p>	<p><b>2.1 Respecting Each Other</b> Every interaction is based on caring professional relationships and respectful acknowledgement of the feelings of children and their families.</p>	<p><b>3.1 Observation, Assessment and Planning</b> Babies and young children are individuals first, each with a unique profile of abilities. Schedules and routines should flow with the child's needs. All planning starts with observing children in order to understand and consider their current interests, development and learning.</p>	<p><b>4.1 Play and Exploration</b> Children's play reflects their wide ranging and varied interests and preoccupations. In their play children learn at their highest level. Play with peers is important for children's development.</p>
<p><b>1.2 Inclusive Practice</b> The diversity of individuals and communities is valued and respected. No child or family is discriminated against.</p>	<p><b>2.2 Parents as Partners</b> Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning.</p>	<p><b>3.2 Supporting Every Child</b> The environment supports every child's learning through planned experiences and activities that are challenging but achievable.</p>	<p><b>4.2 Active Learning</b> Children learn best through physical and mental challenges. Active learning involves other people, objects, ideas and events that engage and involve children for sustained periods.</p>
<p><b>1.3 Keeping Safe</b> Young children are vulnerable. They develop resilience when their physical and psychological well-being is protected by adults.</p>	<p><b>2.3 Supporting Learning</b> Warm, trusting relationships with knowledgeable adults support children's learning more effectively than any amount of resources.</p>	<p><b>3.3 The Learning Environment</b> A rich and varied environment supports children's learning and development. It gives them the confidence to explore and learn in secure and safe, yet challenging, indoor and outdoor spaces.</p>	<p><b>4.3 Creativity and Critical Thinking</b> When children have opportunities to play with ideas in different situations and with a variety of resources, they discover connections and come to new and better understandings and ways of doing things. Adult support in this process enhances their ability to think critically and ask questions.</p>
<p><b>1.4 Health and Well-being</b> Children's health is an integral part of their emotional, mental, social, environmental and spiritual well-being and is supported by attention to these aspects.</p>	<p><b>2.4 Key Person</b> A key person has special responsibilities for working with a small number of children, giving them the reassurance to feel safe and cared for and building relationships with their parents.</p>	<p><b>3.4 The Wider Context</b> Working in partnership with other settings, other professionals and with individuals and groups in the community supports children's development and progress towards the outcomes of Every Child Matters: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic well-being.</p>	<p><b>4.4 Areas of Learning and Development</b> The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is made up of six areas of Learning and Development. All areas of Learning and Development are connected to one another and are equally important. All areas of Learning and Development are underpinned by the Principles of the EYFS.</p>

Storytelling provides a myriad of opportunities for promoting possibility thinking – at any point children can be encouraged to think of alternative directions that the story might take, promoting innovation and creativity.

In the diagram below, Craft suggests that the development of 'possibility thinking' is fostered by the integration of creative teaching and learning.



(Craft, 2006)

This diagram illustrates how the same behaviours are demonstrated by both the learner and the teacher as they work collaboratively in the co-construction of new thinking and new knowledge. In this way, practitioners model the metacognitive skills that children will need to adopt if they are to become successful lifelong learners.

Some practical ways that you can do this include:

- taking risks – feeling comfortable with not knowing and embracing the opportunity for new learning that this provides: *'Shall we see what happens if...?'*
- rising to new challenges – viewing 'being stuck' as a valuable learning opportunity and showing that other people, books and ICT can all be valuable resources for moving forward in our thinking: *'I don't know how to do that. Shall we go and find out?'*
- being willing to share and make mistakes – demonstrating that this is an important part of the learning journey and not something to avoid: *'I've gone wrong here. How can I do it better?'*
- being imaginative – there is more than one way of solving a problem – playing with different perspectives and lines of enquiry: *'Can we do that another way?'*
- being innovative – modelling 'possibility thinking' and opportunities for new connections to be made: *'What will happen if we...?' 'Do you remember what happened when we...?'*
- immersion – getting deeply involved in the learning alongside the children, seeking their contributions with genuine interest in their ideas and thought processes: *'How did you manage to do that?'*

## Encouraging innovation

Gifts are far more likely to emerge in this supportive environment where children are viewed as active agents in the learning process and given the opportunity to think at the peak of their ability.

However, these gifts will only be recognised if we accept that young children's thinking processes will, by the nature of their age, be different from those of adults. In the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia, in northern Italy, the idiosyncrasy of young children's thinking is both respected and celebrated:

*'From a very young age, children seek to produce interpretive theories, to give answers. Some may say that these theories are ingenuous and naïve, but this is of little importance. The important thing is not only to give value, but above all, to understand what lies behind these questions and theories, and what lies behind them is something truly extraordinary.'*

(Rinaldi, 2005)

In this approach, children are encouraged to think creatively, to both find and solve problems – the hypotheses that children invent are highly valued as fascinating insights into their developing thought processes. Practitioners trust the 'false hypotheses' that children hold, understanding that this is simply a reflection of their limited life experience. Rather than ignoring or correcting these theories, practitioners view them as opportunities for children to follow their own lines of enquiry, working alongside them as co-researchers and companions on their learning journeys.

When we listen to children with interest and respect, their theories provide fascinating insights into their thinking which prompt further possibilities. In *Reggio Tutta*, a guide to the city by the children of Reggio, the children share their hypotheses about the trees:

*'at night the sky talks to the trees'*

*'the trees make a kind of music that comes out of their leaves and the flowers too: the wind is the loudest music, the air is the softest'*

*'trees grow by themselves because they want to be born by themselves, because they don't have any owner'*

*'the trees in the forest are really brave'*

*'it's the seed that, when it gets big says 'pine', but in silence, under the ground, and then the tree remembers its name'*

*'in the winter, the trees die of hunger and then in the summer they come back to life: we'll see if they do come back this summer'*

*'the leaves fall off because they are only attached with one hand'.*

In *Reggio Tutta*: a guide to the city, Children of Reggio

Perhaps it is easier for parents and practitioners to recognise the talents that emerge as children's 'big C' creativity than it is for them to see the gifts manifested in the depth of thinking made visible through 'little c' creativity.

### A practitioner asks:

*'I am not sure how to recognise children in my setting who may have particular gifts and talents. How can I do this?'*

Abilities are most likely to be accurately recognised through careful observation and record keeping, for example through learning journeys or photo sequences. Some useful approaches to identifying gifts and talents in very young children are found when carers:

- look for unexpected and surprising responses

- look for persistence and precision in play activities
- look for the ability of a child to reflect upon experiences in greater depth than the child's peers
- look at how children perform in different contexts
- look out for children who interpret the clues and codes in the world about them easily – for instance, street signs as well as the written word
- look out for children who are curious and motivated to find out information or learn new skills for themselves.

Practitioners should bear in mind that children with particular abilities:

- may sometimes become easily bored and frustrated
- may not always have well-developed emotional and social skills
- may prefer the company of adults to other children.

The following case study shows how one setting identified and supported the particular talent of one child.

### Case study: Tanaka

Tanaka attends a new 'all-through' academy and Church of England School which provides an education for children from 3 to 16 years. The school serves a diverse community.

During the nursery year Tanaka showed a real interest in dancing, as did a few of the other children. Practitioners provided instruments so that the children could make their own music to accompany the dancing, and often the children would improvise, playing on upturned buckets for the others to dance to. Tanaka was always choosing to play the bongo drums, so the practitioners enabled him to borrow a set and take them home to practice. He soon showed that he could tap out and copy a complicated beat.

The team continued to provide opportunities for the children to develop their interest in music and dance throughout the nursery year and into Reception, and organised a music workshop with professional musicians for the whole class, followed by an extra session for the gifted and talented group, including Tanaka. This gave them the chance to perform for their family and friends at the end of the day. Everyone enjoyed this.

This inspired the children in the lower part of the academy, from the nursery to Year 4, to arrange their own talent show. Tanaka opted to take part and played his bongo drums alone on the stage with great confidence.



Tanaka has now moved into Year 1 and attends an after-school African drum club. Children in the club will soon be taking part in a concert in the city centre. Tanaka has also developed his interest in drumming out of school, and now plays regularly at his church.

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## Some critical factors in early years provision for gifted and talented children

- It is important to focus on creativity.
- Gifted and talented children do unusual things.
- The stakes are high in social and academic development at this stage when the brain's connections are at their most malleable.
- It is just as easy to turn children off learning as on.
- The natural drive is for broad rather than tunnelled experiences.
- If the capacity to relate to peers and adults at this age is curtailed, there are long-term implications.
- Long-term social and emotional literacy is all-important.
- Early years is on the 'sharp end' of personalisation and the 'system should bend to the individual'.
- There is a danger of too much 'individualisation' – sometimes children need to be part of a group in a collaborative, equitable way.

(DCSF, Pascal, 2006)

### Questions for reflection

- To what extent are children encouraged to make choices about their learning, following their own lines of enquiry?
- How often are children given opportunities to reveal the sophistication of their thinking processes, through both independent and collaborative situations?
- How do you show children that their ideas and hypotheses are highly valued?
- How do you model the skills that children will need to adopt if they are to become successful lifelong learners?

## Section 3 The importance of early language and communication

*When do you think best? What conditions do you need in order to think most effectively?*

Over 50 per cent of children have transient language or communication difficulties when they enter school, according to a report by I-CAN (2006). The majority of these children do not have an entrenched language disability but have simply not experienced a rich communicative environment in the earliest years, either at home or in their settings, where their developing skills can flourish. With the right support many of these children will make good progress, as seen in the Introduction to this guidance, but poor vocabulary or a lack of fluency with spoken language can mask high cognitive or other abilities and limit children's capacity for learning.

Practitioners have an important responsibility to work in genuine partnership with families to ensure that:

- each child's communicative skills are supported and enhanced
- each child's unique aptitudes and passions can be revealed
- communication difficulties do not present a barrier to learning or to revealing each unique child's individual potential.

Practitioners can also mistakenly assume that a child with particularly sophisticated language development will necessarily be gifted and talented. This may or may not be the case – it may simply be that the child has accessed rich expressive language opportunities. Language and communication skills will therefore need to be considered in the context of a broader view of learning and development, creativity and critical thinking.

Listening to children and to their parents is therefore a prerequisite for understanding all children and ensuring that they are able to access their entitlement to provision that celebrates their unique gifts and talents.

The effects of too much or too little challenge are generally the same – boredom, frustration and a lack of engagement, which can lead to a downward spiral of disaffection and behaviour difficulties.

The Young Children's Voices Network establishes the importance of creating a listening culture where practitioners value the importance of listening, are aware of and reflective about how they listen, and respond to experiences and views without discrimination, explaining that this:

- nurtures respectful and confident relationships
- supports and enhances learning and sustained thinking
- may reveal inequalities
- contributes to quality improvement.

When practitioners really tune into children, gaining insights into their strengths, interests and attitudes to learning, they are able to provide responsive experiences pitched at the appropriate level of challenge.

### A practitioner asks:

*'How can we make sure that all children feel secure enough to show their gifts and talents when they start in the setting?'*

For children to feel really secure it is important that they and their parents have the chance to know about the place, the people and the routines that they are coming into. Home visiting is one very good way of making sure that the children, their parents and staff they will be with know enough about each other to feel comfortable.

The following case study provides an example of how one setting approached this. It was originally published by the nursery and infant school as an article in a local magazine.





## Enabling abilities – infant school home visits

*That's the time when my teachers came. I was very excited! Val played Lego® with me. Tracy was talking about coming to school. We took a picture of mummy and daddy and me and the jelly rabbit. If they come to my house again we'll play different games!*

**Harry (4 years old)**

How was *your* first day in school? How long did it take before you started to feel comfortable in the buildings, with the routines, and most importantly with the staff who were caring for you?

Unless children feel settled, secure, comfortable and 'at home' in their setting, they are very unlikely to fully reveal their interests and skills. They will be unlikely to take the personal risks that are the hallmark of effective and creative learning. Settings need to plan carefully to create this sense of 'confidence, belonging, and the esteem of others'.

At our school, home visits are a key part of our induction process, meeting the new pupils in their homes, playing alongside them, and chatting to their parents about their hopes and aspirations for school. From their very first day in school we can talk to the children about their favourite toys, their pets, their brothers and sisters, their interests, and help to make school more welcoming and more familiar.

Harry's mum Hannah found their home visit very valuable:

'Harry was very excited before the visits, and made a jelly rabbit for Tracy and Val (his teachers). He was so happy to open the door and welcome them in! I was able to have a one-to-one talk with his teacher, and as a new parent it settled my mind. Val was on her knees playing with him and talking about some of the other children he would meet in his class. When he came into school he knew who the staff were, he was at ease. He's just so happy and can't wait to come to school.'

© St Saviours CEVC Nursery and Infant School

## Questions for reflection

- How do you ensure that children with restricted language skills can still access challenging learning opportunities?
- What strategies do you have in place to provide a rich language environment for all children, and to extend those with particular strengths in communication and language?
- What approaches do you employ to ensure that the voices of parents and children are heard? What evidence is there that you have responded to this?
- How do you gather information about each unique child before children enter your setting?

## Section 4 A Unique Child

**Principle: Every child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.**

This principle celebrates the uniqueness of every child and urges practitioners to take the time to observe, listen and tune in, to understand what it is that makes each child tick. As children's strengths, interests, preferences and different developmental pathways begin to unfold, practitioners can plan responsively to provide experiences that are relevant, meaningful and tailored to individual needs. It is through listening to young children that gifts and talents emerge.

The Nebraska Starry Night Protocol provides a framework for this approach. A strength of this protocol is that it provides a way of documenting a wide range of abilities. The layout of the recording sheet is designed to encourage a record of the incidence of observed behaviours or even a description. This provides quite detailed information and a useful visual record of the unevenness of development which is often found in young children.

A recording sheet can be found online at: [www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/publications/starry\\_night.pdf](http://www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/publications/starry_night.pdf)  
A further version, adapted for use in English settings and schools, is available in Appendix 2.

The following case study shows how one nursery school and children's centre team used the Nebraska Starry Night Protocol as part of a piece of action research to support them in recognising and identifying young children's gifts and talents in the broadest sense. This approach enabled them to recognise children with dual and multiple exceptionalities. For example, a child with a statement of special educational needs, who could not speak, was particularly gifted in the use of signing and body language, exemplifying key aptitudes for role-play and leadership through expression, enthusiasm and spontaneity.

### Case study: action research on the identification of gifted and talented children in the early years

The children and families attending the setting come from a very broad range of backgrounds. Action research into the identification of gifted and talented children has done much to support the school's development as an inclusive, reflective learning community.

Through their initial research into G&T education, the staff team discovered the Nebraska Starry Night Protocol, which provided a flexible, multi-dimensional model, reflecting the ethos and beliefs of the school and good early years developmental practice. The observation-based protocol sets out 17 'constellations' of areas of expertise, embracing a far wider range of gifts and talents than offered by other more traditional models (see Appendix 2). Early scepticism quickly changed to interest, as staff members found that the protocol gave them a manageable framework for identifying children's unique gifts and talents. For example, a child who was an Eritrean refugee and had been constantly plying the staff with a stream of questions seemed to exemplify 'the Comet' – unexpected, extraordinary, extra special, difficult to classify.

The voices of the practitioner, the parents and the children were all sought and valued as equal participants in the process of identifying gifts and talents. The children proved to be very willing participants, sharing their ideas about themselves as learners both in words and drawings, while the parents and carers were supportive in completing questionnaires and carrying out observations. The parents highly valued the opportunity to focus in greater detail upon their children and it quickly became clear that they were enthusiastic and often skilful reporters of their children's abilities.

When the staff team accepted that young children could be gifted and talented in a range of domains, their ability to identify such giftedness and their confidence in this process grew. They discovered that it was much easier to identify verbal talents than those connected to mathematical thinking or empathy. Interestingly, they began to notice that certain negative behaviours, for example children refusing to tidy up, their lack of interest in playing with children their own age or half-hearted attempts at certain activities could all be indications of giftedness. When these children were given more challenging opportunities to demonstrate their advanced skills, more responsibility or personalised help to find like-minded peers, their self-esteem improved and so did their behaviour and involvement – they began to use their gifts and talents positively.

Close working with the receiving primary schools greatly enhanced the experience of transition for the children identified as gifted and talented and their families, enabling the teachers in Reception to tailor their approaches to reflect the children's strengths and aptitudes. All these children made very good progress and benefited from having further extension in their identified areas of expertise.

## Challenges

- revising thinking about the definition of 'gifted and talented', to recognise 'multiple intelligences' and children's entitlement to provision that reflects this understanding;
- finding appropriate language to describe gifts and talents that is developmentally appropriate for young children and free from value-laden judgements;
- avoiding stereotyped perceptions – it was notable that the children identified in this project represented both genders, a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, different cultural groups and different positions in their families;
- working in genuine and equal partnership with parents and carers, putting practitioners' ideas and beliefs up for close scrutiny by the families of the children;
- identifying children for whom English is an additional language, especially when they attend for a short period of time or are very shy of adult engagement.

## Impact of the project on the parents

- Parents expressed enthusiasm for the project, responding readily to a broader definition of 'gifts and talents' and appreciating the holistic nature of this approach.
- Many parents commented that participation in the research had helped them to 'respect their children's learning and their questions more' or to 'see their children's character and personality in a more positive light'.
- Parents valued the collaborative nature of this endeavour.

## Impact on the nursery school

- The broad and holistic nature of the Nebraska Starry Night Protocol provided a useful framework for celebrating and recording young children's gifts and talents.
- A deeper understanding of differentiation enabled the nursery staff to build on their strengths, increasing the involvement of 'experts' from outside and expeditions to different places, following children's strengths and interests.
- Partnership with parents and trust of the other's perspective has been enhanced. Improved collaborative working with parents has strengthened their ability to support their children's learning and development.

- The research generated a greater emphasis on children's higher-level thinking, encouraging children's hypothesis testing and use of ICT.
- Time is now used more flexibly to allow for extended conversations and challenging explorations, following individual children's interests.
- Key person confidence in providing for gifted and talented children has improved, resulting in designing projects for specific children and pairs, as well as for larger groups.
- Children's own understanding of learning and their strengths and areas to develop have improved – their learning has been made more visible.

The nursery school's focus on gifted and talented children has led to an overall improvement in the quality of learning and teaching for all children, due to more in-depth staff and parent discussion around learning and pedagogy.

© Chelsea Open Air Nursery School & Children's Centre



The GTEU Early Years Bulletin, (DCSF, Pascal, 2006) emphasises that 'Early years is at the heart of personalisation' and this is reflected in the Institutional Quality Standards in Gifted and Talented Education:

*'The curriculum offers personalised learning pathways for children which maximise individual potential, retain flexibility of future choices, extend well beyond test/examination requirements and result in sustained impact on learner attainment and achievement.'*

**Institutional Quality Standards in Gifted and Talented Education 4:** *Enabling curriculum entitlement and choice*



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### Questions for reflection

- How are children's unique gifts and talents recognised, free from stereotyped perceptions?
- How do you support children's understanding of their own learning, making it more visible to them?
- To what extent is time prioritised for extended conversations with children to understand their individual interests and personalities?
- How do you demonstrate that young children can be gifted and talented in a range of domains? How is this communicated with other practitioners, parents and the children themselves?

## Section 5 Positive Relationships

**Principle: Children learn to be strong and independent from a base of loving and secure relationships with parents and/or a key person.**

Every child is unique and the GTEU Early Years Bulletin (DCSF, Pascal, 2006) emphasises that each child's gifts and talents should be regarded as a cause for celebration in a supportive climate, where all can '... share with an "open heart"'.



Children's capacity for learning is powerfully linked to their emotional states and is greatly enhanced when practitioners foster learning environments that recognise and respect the relationship between self-esteem and achievement. Neil-Hall, in *The social and emotional aspects of development: local authority trainers' handbook* (2008) identifies ten key emotional needs that all human beings have:

- attention
- acceptance
- appreciation
- encouragement
- affection
- respect
- support
- comfort
- approval
- security.

Consideration of these emotional needs can support practitioners in developing secure emotional environments which will enable children to flourish as confident and creative learners.

All real learning involves an element of risk taking, and children have to feel that it is safe to leave the comfort of the familiar if they are to make new connections in their learning (see Section 1). The EYFS states that in the most effective settings practitioners support and challenge children's thinking by getting involved in the thinking process with them, showing genuine interest, offering encouragement and clarifying ideas. Young children's gifts and talents will only be revealed when practitioners understand how the beliefs that children hold about themselves as learners affect their capacity for learning.

The GTEU Early Years Bulletin (DCSF, Pascal, 2006) suggests that practitioners *'should become more a partner, active and equal. This encourages ownership of the learning and the fostering of a disposition to learn.'*

Confident dispositions towards learning will be further enhanced when practitioners work in close and equal partnerships with parents. Parents are children's first and most enduring educators, and will invariably know their children best.

Strengthening the links between home, setting and the local community will support children's sense of continuity in their daily lives. Resilience, confidence and well-being are more likely to be nurtured when children experience the world as, in the main, a safe, predictable and reliable place.

*'Children learn from everything they experience, wherever they are and whoever they are with. The greater the continuity between home and setting, and the richer the learning environment in both, the more children will benefit.'*

**(Wheeler and Connor, 2009)**

Close, reciprocal relationships with parents, rooted in genuine trust and respect, will therefore help practitioners to:

- gain a more holistic understanding of each child
- provide insights into unique gifts and talents that may otherwise remain hidden
- support children in developing resilience and confident dispositions towards learning through experiencing greater continuity in their lives.

### A practitioner asks:

*'I have a boy in my nursery setting who has shown some particularly deep-level understanding in his make-believe play. How can I support this, plan to build upon it, and provide further challenge for him?'*

The following case study exemplifies how a PVI (private, voluntary and independent) setting addressed this question. The bullet points at the end show the key processes involved.

### Case study: Samuel the Fireman

This pre-school playgroup has been running for over 30 years on a community college site, with large gardens and an outdoor woodwork room. The setting embraces a Forest School<sup>2</sup> approach and this ethos underpins its work and curriculum. Children attending the pre-school come from very diverse backgrounds, ranging from socially disadvantaged to affluent.

At four years old, Samuel has been attending the setting for one year and is now becoming a confident 'leader'. He and his friend Joseph consistently come to the setting dressed as firefighters and their friendship has flourished around this common interest. They constantly seek each other out and create new role-play scenarios, highly absorbed in their role-play. Samuel's enthusiasm has spread to other children who gravitate around him and get involved in the play that he generates. Fire helmets have become valuable props and builders' helmets just will not do! Samuel and Joseph bring their helmets from home every day, and other children are beginning to follow their lead. On days when they are not both attending, Samuel and Joseph really miss each other. They have instinctively recognised that they are working at a different level from that of the other children. They both share a deep knowledge of everything that relates to firefighting, and their play is sophisticated and intense. Samuel's higher-level thinking skills soon became evident, and practitioners planned opportunities for him to further develop his language and problem-solving skills, which enabled him to express his ideas more fully.

Forest School uses the natural outdoor environment to support play and learning. To find out more about Forest School visit:  
<http://www.forestschools.com/history-of-forest-schools.php>

On one occasion while some of the children were engaged in playing with a fire engine they had helped Samuel and Joseph to build from milk crates, old tyres and other 'found' materials, another group decided they wanted to cook toast for their snack. The practitioner built a fire at the other end of the garden, and Daniel, one of the firefighter aficionados shouted: 'Stop everyone, emergency! Firefighters, there is a real fire!'

Samuel and Joseph were first on the scene with hoses in hands. When reassured that the fire was under control, they had their snack around the fire and later were keen to have a turn at extinguishing it.

This real situation generated new enthusiasm, leading Samuel and Joseph to invest further energy in their research. They were very proud of the book they created from photographs of them building the fire engine. They looked at it and talked about it regularly and have both excitedly shared it with their families, helping information to flow informally between home and setting. Samuel's family took him to the local fire station.

Samuel's deep interest in firefighting is enabling his creativity and thinking skills to develop at a high level, and although this might not evolve into being 'gifted and talented' at a later stage, it needs to be recognised by the practitioners now, in order for him to continue to be challenged, and for his expertise, confidence and leadership skills to grow.

It required flexible practitioners who understood his passion and:

- accepted that he could do everything dressed as a firefighter, including going off-site
- observed, listened and talked to him
- did not underestimate his knowledge and thinking skills
- provided relevant resources, including books
- communicated with home to share the joy of this learning
- recorded the learning through photos, observations and the creation of the book
- enhanced his learning through reflection on the next steps at each stage.



*Samuel extinguishing the fire*

© Hind Leys Pre-School.



*'The setting/school/college places equal emphasis on high achievement and emotional well-being, underpinned by programmes of support personalised to the needs of gifted and talented learners. There are opportunities for pupils to use their gifts to benefit other pupils and the wider community.'*

**Institutional Quality Standards in Gifted and Talented Education 9: Setting/ School/  
College ethos and pastoral care**

### Questions for reflection

- How do you foster relationships that are enabling and empowering?
- How do you strengthen the links between home, setting and the local community to support children's sense of continuity and build resilience?
- To what extent do you see yourself as a companion in children's learning, supporting and challenging their thinking by getting involved in the thinking process with them?
- How do you know that every child and every family feels valued and respected for who they are and what they bring?

## Section 6 Enabling Environments

**Principle: The environment plays a key role in supporting and extending children's development and learning.**

*'A rich and varied environment supports children's learning and development. It gives them the confidence to explore and learn in secure and safe, yet challenging, indoor and outdoor spaces.'*

**(EYFS 3.3)**

Children's experiences in the EYFS are largely shaped by the quality of the learning environment, inside and out. Practitioners have a responsibility to ensure that the environment is planned to inspire, challenge and capture the imagination of every child. Through their play, children's gifts and talents will emerge as they experiment, explore and interact with the environment around them, practising and consolidating old skills, and discovering new ones. This cannot happen in a vacuum – the EYFS profile shows us that children cannot demonstrate their aptitudes and passions for learning if the opportunities are simply not there. This is particularly true of creative development. Children are unable to access their entitlement to a full range of creative languages – for example music, dance, drama, sculpture, painting – if the provision is not available to them. Again, in Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy, scale point 8: 'uses developing mathematical ideas and methods to solve practical problems' is often missed – not because children lack competence in this area, but because the opportunity for them to demonstrate their developing thinking skills is not there.

The example below illustrates the sophistication of young children's capacity for solving problems when practitioners encourage children to take charge of their learning and to think for themselves.

### Kamrin – solving problems creatively

Kamrin (5 years 7 months old) wants to solve the problem of whether his chosen number, 8, can be shared equally between two. In this example he wrote '8?' and then added a cross to show that he thought it could not. On reflection he invented 'tweedle birds', giving each in turn a tweedle bird egg until he had shared the eight eggs. Finally he scribbled over the cross he'd first written and added a tick to confirm that 8 could be shared equally.



© E. Carruthers & M. Worthington. Published by Sage, 2006

### EYFS: Creative development

Children's creativity must be extended by the provision of support for their curiosity, exploration and play.

Children must be provided with opportunities to explore and share their thoughts, ideas and feelings, for example through a variety of art, music, movement, dance, imaginative and role-play activities, mathematics and design technology.

**(Wheeler and Connor, 2009)**

## A practitioner asks:

*'I would love to develop a 'community of enquiry' within our setting. I'm sure that some of the children I teach have real talents, but some of them find it really difficult to work with other children to explore anything in depth. How can I provide opportunities for children to explore their ideas and feelings with others?'*

Here are some suggestions of approaches which practitioners have found to be helpful in developing an environment that supports collaborative problem-solving.

- Encourage responsibility by enabling children to access resources independently and put them away carefully.
- Encourage autonomy and build confidence so that children can begin to make decisions and think for themselves.
- Promote children's self-esteem, in the knowledge that their choices and contributions are valued and important.
- Create opportunities for high levels of involvement .
- Provide meaningful contexts for learning rooted in children's interests and experience.
- Value children's personal space, offering opportunities for children to interact with each other, or to be alone.
- Encourage a balance between action and calm, noise and quiet.
- Provide secure links between home and school.

The following case study shows how a planned environment enabled one child to demonstrate creative leadership abilities which had previously been undiscovered.

## Case study: John the explorer

The children in this case study were invited to work with an artist, a parent and the class teacher over a series of sessions, collecting and exploring things that were 'special' to them, while researching the question 'What makes a creative environment?'. The six children were chosen because they all had some degree of difficulty in relating comfortably to other children in the class. Their teacher felt they had not yet found a voice to express themselves easily in school and thought that they would particularly benefit from working in a quieter space with high-quality adult attention and support. The adults all supported the documentation of the research.

Initially a 1.5 metre square of paper was fixed onto the corridor wall, good-quality pastels were provided and the children were invited to draw things they felt were special to them. They all seemed happy to engage with the activity and worked well together over the whole paper until the end of the session. Jane observed that John seemed noticeably more at ease in the company of the other children than he usually was in school. He did not interact very much verbally, but positioned himself physically much closer to other children than he usually liked to, drawing calmly, shoulder to shoulder with the others.

In the next session Jane began by showing the whole class pictures of their trip to the museum, and followed this by sharing some of her own china treasures. Afterwards, John made a richly decorated plate, using an innovative choice of materials, and was totally absorbed for the whole session. Later, in the playground, John was making up games and showing them to the others. Jane commented that this calmer, more sociable behaviour in the playground marked a significant change for John – he seemed happy.

John then made another significant shift – from creative activity into creative leadership. The corridor skylights were covered with coloured cellophane and a strip of newsprint had been laid along the floor to 'catch' the colours. John decided the paper had to be drawn on and began to make the paper strip into a train track. He soon realised that he could not manage to draw the whole length of the paper (about 10 metres) so he enlisted the help of the artist, giving her clear instructions on what to do: 'Draw six lines, then change colour' (to echo the colours on the skylights). He then enlisted the help of three other boys and completed the task by the end of the session.



*Oh yeah – that was drawing the track...Drawing, drawing, drawing...*

From his mother we know that John likes doing creative things at home but doesn't know when to stop, because he doesn't like it when the things he loves come to an end. He has talked about the research project at home and is very keen. His mother thinks he appreciates the one-to-one attention.

His teacher thinks John's participation in the project has made a significant impact on him. His playground difficulties stopped completely and he became more able to be with others in shared activities. He gradually grew more talkative as the sessions continued and began to share his interests. He developed the confidence to take a lead and then to take a management role. John's image of himself changed, from someone who had to comply with 'what boys do' to someone with a role as an instigator and explorer. The focus of the research project within the security of a small group gave him the outlet and therefore facilitated that shift, revealing his capacity for learning and making a positive contribution.

## Enabling environments and new provocations

Continuous provision – planned opportunities that are always available to the children – needs to be constantly reviewed to monitor children's interest and engagement levels in each area, and refreshed in response to these observations. Are the resources beginning to look tired and in need of attention, or are the challenges losing their edge? Although children need the emotional security that a predictable and familiar environment brings, they will also need new provocations to spark their thinking and generate new connections in their learning. While the basic structure will remain the same, some of the resources will need to change to reflect children's developing knowledge, skills and understanding, if the provision is to maintain their deep interest.

Observation is the key to planning an enabling environment. This allows the practitioner to start from the children's strengths and interests and select 'intelligent' resources that will support and extend their thinking. Open-ended resources that can be used flexibly and creatively will provide opportunities for:

- problem solving and innovation that help children to develop confidence in themselves as learners and a 'growth mindset'
- children to develop new connections in their learning
- children to represent their ideas in ways which are meaningful to them
- interactions with others as children discover new possibilities and communicate their ideas, safe in the knowledge that there is no external expectation of a right or wrong way.

Time, space and attention will enable children's gifts and talents to flourish. Every child should have an entitlement to a calm environment where they have the time and space to work in depth, alongside knowledgeable adults who support them as co-researchers on their learning journey.

*'The setting up of enriched environments is critical, though it is all too easy to make an environment over-stimulating. Most gifted and talented children prefer to investigate in depth rather than flit from one superficial task to another. The level of openness in the resource and environment should be such that the child is able to explore boundaries, allowing uniqueness to emerge. It is in this zone that many gifts and talents emerge.'*

**(DCSF, Pascal, 2006)**

Examples of frameworks which schools have used to plan environments that support learning are included in the appendices.

Appendix 3 shows planning for a focused activity with a small group of able children, and Appendix 4 shows how activities can be planned flexibly across a variety of areas to respond to individual needs and interests.



- 34 The National Strategies | Early Years  
Finding and exploring young children's fascinations  
Strengthening the quality of gifted and talented provision in the early years

*'Resources are used to stimulate innovative and experimental practice, which is shared throughout the setting/school/college and is regularly reviewed for impact and best value'*

**Institutional Quality Standards in Gifted and Talented Education 11: Resources**

### Questions for reflection

- How do you create a learning environment inside and out that is rich in possibilities?
- In what ways are children encouraged to be independent and take responsibility for their environment?
- How do you make sure that there are opportunities for every child to be inspired, challenged and valued?
- To what extent do you monitor children's interest and engagement levels in each area of the environment, and review and refresh resources in response to individual aptitudes, interests and passions?

# Section 7 Learning and Development

**Principle: Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates and all areas of learning and development are equally important and interconnected.**

*'Babies and young children are individuals first, each with a unique profile of abilities. Schedules and routines should flow with the child's needs. All planning starts with observing children in order to understand and consider their current interests, development and learning.'*

**(EYFS 3:1)**

When practitioners provide opportunities for children to talk and take the time to listen with genuine interest, as discussed in Section 2, they will often be amazed at the sophistication of young children's thinking. We regularly underestimate children's knowledge and understanding of their world by failing to recognise that they already possess considerable expertise in the things that interest them. If children are excluded from the planning process, we leave them with few opportunities to share what they know, but when practitioners enable children to follow their fascinations and negotiate lines of enquiry, in authentic partnership with others, their capacity for learning can be transformed. Appendix 5 provides an example of a framework which could support the involvement of children planning their own learning.

In this view, practitioners become genuine partners in the learning process alongside the children and this is a very demanding, but ultimately fulfilling role. Sometimes leading and sometimes following, knowing when to teach new skills and when to listen, observe and document, modelling inquiry or gathering relevant resources, all require a high level of skill.

## A practitioner asks:

*'How can I extend children when I do not have the expertise in their area of interest?'*

The practitioner is a facilitator, not being the expert and answering questions but asking 'real' questions with the children and problem solving together. We are all learners, and children enjoy learning with adults and being the 'expert'. However, you can also provide different learning opportunities by bringing a range of other adults into your setting. Sculptors, poets, park keepers – the list is endless. Parents, carers and grandparents provide a rich resource, as do older children.

The following case study shows how one setting draws on a range of community members in one aspect of its holistic approach to G&T provision.

## Case study: special interest areas

Policies in one school are carefully designed to identify and cater for the needs of the children who achieve very highly, as well as those who might be experiencing learning or physical difficulties. The teachers make regular observations of all the children to understand better their learning potential and achievement patterns.

Identified strengths have included:

- creativity
- the ability to learn easily
- artistic talent
- persistence and resourcefulness

- verbal fluency
- musical ability
- a high level of empathy.

Individual provision plans for children in Reception are then designed to support and challenge these children through a variety of strategies, including highly differentiated tasks, different programmes of work and homework projects.

This approach ensures that staff recognise and develop every child's potential gifts and talents, so opportunities are provided for children to follow and celebrate their interests and strengths. There are successful enrichment days that offer a range of carefully designed workshops to engage children in mixed-age groups in special interest areas including art, mathematics, science, literacy, sport, dance, cooking and drama, all run by staff and parents. These workshops are well documented by parents, using photography and note taking; older children act as workshop 'experts' to explain the activities to visiting groups.

Over the last four years, the children in each Reception class (and more recently the whole school) have been involved in a creativity research project working alongside an artist to develop their creative ideas using a range of different media. Children are given the opportunity to explore their own themes and questions and encouraged to create their own artwork. Thorough documentation of their thoughts, feelings and ideas forms the basis of projects: responsive planning is used to develop and pursue further ideas.



All children benefit and make excellent progress because they are instrumental in their own learning. This involvement leads to the development of self-esteem and encourages social and moral responsibility. From the earliest years, children are given opportunities to make decisions about their work, plan their own tasks, find appropriate resources and review the outcomes. These skills provide a sound foundation on which teachers can develop further a child's independence. Each child is carefully supported with individual strategies that cater for that child's unique needs, and offered 'stretching' opportunities as necessary to ensure that every child achieves excellent academic and personal progress.



## Exploring children's feelings about themselves as learners

The case study above and others in this guidance provide examples of how children's emotional and social well-being can impact on their capacity to demonstrate latent abilities. See Appendix 6 for the audit from the Social and Emotional Aspects of Development (SEAD) materials, which provides a valuable framework for exploring the quality of learning and development in the EYFS and the extent to which this supports children's emotional and cognitive needs.



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*'Teaching and learning are suitably challenging and varied, incorporating the breadth, depth and pace required to progress high achievement. Learners routinely work independently and self-reliantly'*

**Institutional Quality Standards in Gifted and Talented Education 2:** *Effective provision in the setting/classroom*

### Questions for reflection

- How do you plan experiences that are rich in provocations and encourage children to think creatively?
- How do you capture children's fascinations and expertise and to what extent do you involve children in your planning?
- How do you know that children have enough time and space to explore and develop their strengths and interests in depth?
- How does your planning ensure that enrichment experiences are built upon, and that they contribute in an integrated way to the longer-term, holistic development of children's learning and development?

## Section 8 Next steps – moving into Key Stage 1

*'Where communication between settings, staff, parents and pupils is less than effective, and information incomplete, the receiving school may waste valuable time before recognising the pupil's ability and making appropriate provision.'*

***Gifted and talented education: Guidance on addressing underachievement – planning a whole-school approach. (DCSF, 2009)***

The importance of continuity for children has already been stressed in this guidance, and practitioners will need to consider how the critical factors outlined above inform planning for G&T provision as children make the transition from the EYFS to Year 1. Some children, particularly the youngest, will experience significant challenges when they move to Year 1.

Some positive responses to the challenges which might face gifted and talented children include:

- finding out about each child's particular interests and abilities
- supporting children who have additional social, emotional and/or learning needs
- understanding that a possible drop in performance during the settling-in period may mask true potential
- building on prior learning and experiences rather than using a fixed starting point for all children in the group
- involving Key Stage 1 teachers in the moderation of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) to increase their understanding of the EYFSP and their confidence in the assessment process
- providing opportunities for joint observations, shared reflection and discussion between teachers in the Reception Year and Year 1 to deepen awareness of pedagogy and classroom practice across the two year groups.



The case study below shows how one local authority developed effective strategies to build continuity and seamless transitions from the EYFS to Key Stage 1.

## Case study: Smooth transitions

### Rationale

Points of transition are a critical time for all young children, and need to be managed sensitively by schools to provide a high degree of continuity and consistency of approach. This requires that practitioners in both year groups have a clear understanding of the principles of the EYFS and those aspects that will continue into Year 1.

Smooth Transitions has been an ongoing project over the past two years to support schools in preserving and developing the best of EYFS practice as children move into Year 1.

The key points of focus have been:

- providing a curriculum which is relevant to children
- first-hand experience
- learning using senses and movement
- play
- learning inside and outside the classroom
- opportunities to work at length and in depth
- organisation which allows independence
- partnership with families and carers
- ongoing observation-led assessment.

### So what have we been doing?

A key success in the delivery of Smooth Transitions has been the amalgamation of support given to schools through a range of strategies, notably those which follow.

- An exciting story-making project has been supported by the International Learning and Research Centre with the aim of improving children's early language and writing in a progressive way. Participating schools were supported in school-based enquiry across the EYFS and Key Stage 1 with a focus on developing children's skills to strengthen the bridge between early oracy and writing.
- Locality workshops were run jointly by the early years and primary teams for all headteachers and Year 1 teachers, with feedback from pilot schools on the impact in their schools.
- Termly 'Bring and Brag' network sessions took place in local areas to disseminate effective practice.
- A Year 1 toolkit that includes planning models was provided.
- Half-day early years consultant support visits took place.
- There was a universal training for Reception and Year 1 teachers.
- A website was set up specifically for Year 1 teachers to access further resources and ideas.
- A newsletter was circulated to disseminate best practice.

## The Year 1 Toolkit

Our Reception teachers reported how useful they found the 16 EYFS commitment cards in reflecting on their practice. A series of leaflets has been constructed to exemplify best practice in Year 1 based on the EYFS model. Through Consultants' visits, it is becoming clear that a number of schools are now using these to audit provision across the whole of Key Stage 1 – and in some cases Key Stage 2 as well.

## What are we doing next?

- Further school-based case studies are being developed.

## What has been the impact? – quotes from schools

*'It has made us increase the amount of "play" for Year 1 pupils and helped us justify to parents why their children are still playing when they are in Year 1.'*

*'We feel the children enjoy school more, as they have more say in their own learning through their involvement in child-initiated activities, incorporating assessment for learning strategies. We enjoy teaching as it seems more natural to learn through play and be more active. Parents' responses have been very positive.'*

*'I think that we are now able to see the transfer of children from Reception to Key Stage 1 more as a continuum rather than the change between two curricula.'*



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*'The touchstone of an excellent curriculum is that it instils in children a love of learning for its own sake. This means that primary children must not only learn what to study, they must also learn how to study, and thus become confident, self-disciplined individuals capable of engaging in a lifelong process of learning.'*

(DCSF, Rose, 2009)

This will create the conditions for children's gifts and talents, their aptitudes and their passions to continue to grow.

## Questions for reflection

- What opportunities currently exist for Reception and Year 1 teachers to develop and deepen their understanding of each others' pedagogy and classroom practice?
- How do you know that children are experiencing continuity when they move from the EYFS to Key Stage 1?
- How is information about children's strengths, interests, aptitudes and passions shared and celebrated across the year groups?

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the organisations below who have contributed to the development of this guidance through discussion of its scope, nature and format.

5x5x5 Creativity

Alfreton Nursery School, Derbyshire

Bedgrove Infant School, Buckinghamshire

Chelsea Open Air Nursery School and Children's Centre

Clockhouse Primary School, Havering

Havering Local Authority

Hind Leys Pre-school, Leicestershire

Highfield Community School, Plymouth

Lincoln Gardens Primary School, N Lincolnshire

Reggio Children

Scottish Network for Able Pupils, University of Glasgow

The Samworth Enterprise Academy, Leicester

Sightlines Initiative

South West Gifted and Talented Regional Partnership (SWGATE)

St Bede's RC VA Primary School, Redcar and Cleveland

The National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE)

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)

West Berkshire Local Authority

Wingate Children's Centre, Durham

We are particularly grateful to those settings and schools who have provided case studies and examples of their practice which are included in this guidance:

Batheaston CEVC Primary School, Bath and North East Somerset

Chelsea Open Air Nursery School and Children's Centre

Dorset Local Authority

Hind Leys Pre-school, Leicestershire

Moorlands Infants School, Bath and North East Somerset

The Samworth Enterprise Academy, Leicester

St Saviour's C of E Nursery and Infants School, Bath and North East Somerset

Wingate Children's Centre, Durham

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Appendix 2, Categorization Grid Sheet by Johanna M Raffan from Murcott, J. et al (2006) *Early Years Able Learners: Identification and Provision*, National Association for Able Children in Education. Adapted from *Nebraska Starry Night: Individual Record Sheet* by Johanna M. Raffan with kind permission of Nebraska University. First published in the *Flying High journal*, Spring 1995 © NACE.

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Appendix 5, Learning and development exemplar planning framework © Dorset Local Authority. Used with kind permission.

## Appendices

Appendix 1 Institutional Quality Standards (IQS) linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage Themes and Commitments	Themes			
Generic IQS elements with some exemplar descriptors	A Unique Child	Positive Relationships	Enabling Environments	Learning and Development
<b>1. Identification</b> <i>Multiple criteria and sources of evidence are used to identify gifts and talents</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>2. Effective provision in the setting</b> <i>Teaching and learning strategies are diverse and flexible, meeting the needs of distinct groups of children (for example, able underachievers, exceptionally able)</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>3. Standards</b> <i>Self-evaluation indicates that gifted and talented provision is satisfactory/ good/very good or excellent</i>	✓			✓
<b>4. Enabling environments, entitlement and choice</b> <i>The provision offers personalised learning pathways which maximise individual potential</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>5. Assessment for learning</b> <i>Practice regularly requires children to reflect on their own learning</i>	✓			✓
<b>6. Transition and transfer</b> <i>Transfer information concerning gifted and talented children, including parental contributions, informs the next steps in learning for children to ensure progress</i>	✓	✓		✓
<b>7. Leadership</b> <i>Responsibility for gifted and talented provision is distributed and evaluation of its impact shared at all levels</i>	✓			



Finding and exploring young children's fascinations  
Strengthening the quality of gifted and talented provision in the early years

Generic IQS elements with some exemplar descriptors	A Unique Child	Positive Relationships	Enabling Environments	Learning and Development
<p><b>8. Policy</b></p> <p><i>The policy directs and reflects best practice, is regularly reviewed and is clearly linked to other policy documentation</i></p>	✓			
<p><b>9. Ethos and pastoral care</b></p> <p><i>An ethos of ambition and achievement is agreed and shared by the whole community. Success across a wide range of abilities is celebrated</i></p>	✓	✓		✓
<p><b>10. Staff development</b></p> <p><i>There is ongoing audit of staff needs and an appropriate range of professional development opportunities in gifted and talented provision</i></p>	✓			
<p><b>11. Resources</b></p> <p><i>Resources are used to stimulate innovative and experimental practice</i></p>	✓		✓	
<p><b>12. Monitoring and evaluation</b></p> <p><i>Elements of provision are planned against clear objectives within effective self-evaluation processes</i></p>	✓			✓
<p><b>13. Engaging with the community, families and beyond</b></p> <p><i>Progression of gifted and talented children is enhanced by home and setting partnerships. There are strategies to engage and support hard-to-reach parents/carers</i></p>	✓	✓	✓	
<p><b>14. Learning beyond the setting</b></p> <p><i>A coherent programme of enrichment and extension activities complements the provision and helps identify children's latent gifts and talents</i></p>	✓	✓	✓	

Appendix 2 Tool to support the recording of interests, dispositions and capabilities



Diagram 5  
Categorization Grid Sheet



National Association  
for Able Children  
in Education

**Name of Child:**

**Vocabulary**  
Fluent, detailed,  
comprehends, uses complex  
words and sentences, uses  
facial expression & body  
language to communicate

**Curious**  
Always asking questions,  
notices, examines, observes,  
has insight

**Stays Focused**  
Can be intensely focused if  
there is sufficient challenge

**Acts as an Expert**  
Sought out by others, seen as  
a resource, shows how, is  
responsive, admired

**Imaginative**  
Invents, imitates, pretends,  
responds to novel stimuli,  
may have unusual possibly  
'silly' ideas

**Explores**  
Experiments, builds, designs,  
constructs, organises, plays,  
enjoys learning in unusual  
ways

**Independent**  
Works alone, initiates,  
perfectionist, self-critical

**Sees the Big Picture**  
Sees beyond the obvious,  
recognises pattern,  
associates, predicts,  
analyses, theorises

**Creative**  
Shows signs of originality

**Visual and Spatial**  
Advanced spatial awareness,  
aware of body space, sees in  
pictures, creates unusual  
patterns, good at puzzles

**Sensitive**  
Expressive, has insight,  
thoughtful, helpful,  
sympathetic,  
emphatic, anxious, self  
aware, aware of being  
different

**Mover and Doer**  
Advanced early motor  
development, demonstrates,  
constructs, non-verbal  
expressive

**Problem Solver**  
Comprehends, reasons,  
connects, finds, applies past  
learning, explains, calculates,  
understands processes

**Observant**  
Notices detail, quick &  
accurate recall, alert

**Humorous**  
Original, spontaneous, quick  
witted, enjoys adult humour,  
makes jokes

**Is Hungry for Attention**  
Eager to be involved,  
attempts to be centre stage


**A Leader**  
Initiates, directs, leads,  
attracts, shows how, offers or  
extends instructions, helps,  
advises, encourages










**Significant Moments**  
Unexpected, extraordinary,  
extra special, difficult to  
classify, non-conformist

**Photocopy this diagram as required**

<b>Appendix 3 Example of planning for a focused activity</b>	
Name of adult:	Date:
<b>Area of the curriculum</b>	
Philosophy for Learning group	
What I want the children to learn	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To formulate their own questions through the stimulus of a picture</li> <li>● To listen and take turns in communicating their thoughts and ideas in an appropriate manner</li> <li>● To communicate their own ideas in order to answer the questions they have formulated</li> </ul>	
<b>Resources</b>	
Four photographs of people, cards with questions, chairs, Philosophy Rabbit	
<b>Activity</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introduce Philosophy Rabbit. Ask the children what they did during the weekend. They should take turns to talk, while holding Philosophy Rabbit.</li> <li>● Show children question cards. What do you think they may represent? How? Why? (Because, Agree, Disagree.)</li> <li>● Tell the children Philosophy Rabbit has brought in a picture to share with them.</li> <li>● Ask the children to hold their thoughts and questions about the picture in their heads.</li> <li>● Allow the children to pose their own 'Why?' and 'How?' questions, as well as to discuss their thoughts and ideas about why this may be apparent from the picture.</li> <li>● Allow the children to vote 'agree' or 'disagree' about whether they think the face is happy.</li> </ul>	
<b>Plenary</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Draw together all the 'Why' questions formulated by the children.</li> </ul>	
<b>Vocabulary</b>	
Question, how, why, because, maybe, agree, disagree, philosophy, think, know, understand, feel	
<b>Differentiation</b>	
Group of children targeted for this focus activity	
Differentiate language where appropriate, according to the children's needs	
<b>Evaluation</b>	

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Appendix 4 Enabling environment example of planning		
<p><b>Role-play</b></p> <p>Pet shop/veterinary surgery/animal habitat</p> <p>Pupils to set up, label areas, roles, etc.</p> <p>'Feelings' labels for animals</p> <p><b>Small world</b></p> <p>Animal homes/farm/animal 'care kits'</p>	<p><b>Art/graphics</b></p> <p>Number/animal collage</p> <p>Line making based on 'feelings' – link with personal, social and health education (PSHE)</p> <p>Graffiti wall</p> <p><b>Context for learning – Year 1</b></p>  <p>The great pet sale</p>	<p><b>Construction/design and technology</b></p> <p>Lego® numbers</p> <p>Animal homes</p> <p><b>Mathematics</b></p> <p>Shop – using farm animals, label up to 10p. 'Shoppers' to spend 10p, 'keepers' to work out change</p> <p><b>ICT</b></p> <p>Labelling pets in petshop/prices/change in purses</p>
<p><b>Outdoors</b></p> <p>Story maps</p> <p>Adult working with group in garden on Tuesdays</p> <p>Water tray</p> <p>Chalk numbers on pavement/price labels</p>	<p><b>Writing area</b></p> <p>Word wall; labelling types of animals using adjectives</p> <p>Posters advertising pet sale and special offers</p> <p>Labelling animals and prices</p> <p><b>Books/speaking and listening</b></p> <p>Non-fiction texts about animals</p> <p>Animal stories</p> <p>Word wall – linked with word-level work on short vowel sounds</p> <p><b>Music</b></p> <p>Pitch – up and down chime bars</p>	<p><b>Investigation and design</b></p> <p>Developing our outdoor area</p> <p>Role-play area: designs needed</p> <p>Roofing materials needed for animal shelter</p> <p><b>Discovery/topic table</b></p> <p>Plant growth monitoring</p> <p>Materials assessment</p> <p>Experimenting with light – potato in box, plant in cupboard, etc.</p>
<p><b>Emphasis on nurture</b> during all activities – recognise, name and deal with feelings in a positive way..</p>		

Appendix 5 Learning and development exemplar planning framework			
Role-play	Individual Planning Sheet	ICT	
 <b>Name</b> <b>Date</b> <b>Areas of interest and expertise</b>	<p>To be completed together with the child</p> <p>Choose boxes as appropriate</p>	 <b>Investigation/design</b>	 <b>Books/speaking and listening</b>
	 <b>Mathematics</b>		 <b>Writing area</b>
	 <b>Construction/design and Technology</b>		 <b>Art/graphics</b>
 <b>Small world</b>			 <b>Outdoors</b>

## Appendix 6 SEAD materials - audit of opportunities to support children's emotional and cognitive development

Is this a place where...?	Child's voice	Practitioner's voice	How do you know? What do you see?	How can it be made better?
Learning and development	4.1 The importance of play and recreation for my health, well-being, independence and spontaneity is appreciated, encouraged and developed			
	4.2 I am given time and space to explore, observe, experiment, discover, question, reflect, concentrate and develop my own interests			
	4.3 I feel it's OK to be unsure, to ask questions, take risks, make mistakes and learn			
	4.3 I am allowed to reflect and change my mind, ideas, thoughts, beliefs			
	4.4 All aspects of my learning and development are considered equally important. My strengths and areas for development are recognised and supported.			



Audience: All early years practitioners, head teachers, leaders and managers and Local Authority early years teams.

Date of issue: 03-2010

Ref: **00107-2010BKT-EN**

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Copies of this publication may be available from:

DCSF Publications

PO Box 5050

Sherwood Park

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Textphone 0845 60 555 60

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Children, Schools and Families

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