Good practice in working with babies, toddlers and very young children
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How do very young children learn?
In recent years detailed study of the development of the brain has established that a rich complex of connections is made in the very early years, more connections in total than are made at any other time of our life. All the babies’ efforts with movement, making physical contact and early communication develop the possible neural networks within their immature brains. All their activities, from a broad, happy smile for a familiar face to an enthusiastic crawl across the room, support actual connections in their young brain that shape how babies and toddlers continue to relate to the world.

The most recent research, linking brain development to how very young children learn, supports what has been seen as good practice with under threes and what adults have done who enjoy playing with young children.

- Caring adults need to give babies time, attention and affection. We need to relish all the early signs that babies are taking notice and are learning: their smiles, waves and that steady stare showing interest.
- Babies and toddlers are social beings. They are primed to learn and communicate. They need plenty of opportunities for early communication including close physical contact and touch.
- They need to develop affectionate social relationships because they learn through the security of a safe base and a predictable, familiar daily life.
- The early years are a time of great potential, some of which can be lost if parents and other carers relate poorly to babies and toddlers, leaving them insecure or without affection.

Babies and very young children are primed to learn. But it is important to tune in to their understanding, the flow of their interests and current abilities.

- Under threes are not helped if adults channel their experience in a very narrow way. This ‘window of opportunity’ needs adults to offer developmentally appropriate experiences and absolutely not to rush babies and toddlers on through these vital early years.
- Very young children learn best at their own pace and by following their absorbing current interests. There is time for them to explore, find out, practise and learn.
- Trying to make young children learn something earlier and quicker does not help them to learn better and can actually disrupt their confidence and flow of learning.
- They do not need to be rushed onto the next stage and such adult pressure is likely to block and not enhance their learning. We need to resist over-loading young children with stimulation and to avoid the ‘build a better baby’ type products that have emerged, especially in the United States.
- Babies and toddlers learn through doing and need plenty of opportunities to use their physical abilities and to apply their ideas. The clear preference of very young children for ‘do it again!’ is ideal for their learning.
- Under threes need an environment that is safe enough to protect their safety, but not so full of concerned adults that life is boring and without any challenge.
- They need plenty of play materials, but under threes are prepared to be interested in almost anything. There are some excellent play resources on the market, but
children do not need lots of commercially produced toys. They learn best from flexible play materials that can be used in many different ways.

**Positive attitudes to care of very young children**

Training modules and written material for working with very young children tend to focus on technicalities of care routines and health risks. Sometimes this knowledge seems to be separate from awareness of early development.

- High standards in care and hygiene are important – no question about it.
- But, these issues need to be linked to a clear focus on young children as individuals who are learning and making close relationships from the earliest months.
- Early years practitioners need to feel confident about the care routines and committed to high standards in this area of work.
- Then, the point of this confidence is that good practice becomes a natural part of adult behaviour. The technical details fade into the background and practitioners focus on the individual babies and toddlers themselves.

Developmentally appropriate care of very young children depends as much on the positive attitudes of practitioners as the details of daily care practice.

**Babies and toddlers are interesting in their own right**

You need to focus on babies and toddlers as they are now: what they can manage, what they find fascinating and the ways in which they relate to the world. What they are learning is important for itself and not just for what will happen later. For instance, the pre-verbal communication of very young children (the gestures, looks and how they use a few single words to carry a multitude of meanings) are all valuable and exciting - not just as steps towards being able to talk.

**Caring adults count more than equipment**

Think of yourselves as the most vital items of play equipment in your nursery. If adults relate fully and appropriately with babies and toddlers, then the children will learn through that relationship. Young children will also be able to take advantage of the play materials and activities that you offer. On the other hand, if adults are emotionally distanced from babies and toddlers, then good play equipment cannot make up that loss.

**The whole day matters**

Babies and toddlers do not split up their lives into different sections, so neither should their adult carers. Look ahead to see how you can use all the learning opportunities for the very young. You need to look at a baby’s or toddler’s day as a whole and not as a list of separate activities. It is useful to have plans for each day and young children like some sense of routine. But watch out that nobody in the team is making the assumption that some parts of the day are less valuable than others.

**Care and learning**

The idea of an early years curriculum is now well established. But you cannot reach a suitable ‘very early years curriculum’ by making a few adjustments to plans for older children. Planning for the younger ones has some aspects in common with a curriculum for older children. But there are also unique features to helping babies and very young children as they learn.

Good early years practice with children from three years to five or six years of age has been flexible and based in a rich play curriculum and enjoyable involvement in daily
routines. Pressures during the 1990s in many parts of the UK raised serious anxieties about an over-structured, formal approach with too much focus on evidence and not enough on process and observation of children. The different early years curriculum guidance booklets for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland all have a positive approach to young children’s learning. But none of them are designed to be used with under-threes and certainly not with babies or toddlers.

A good day with very young children, a day with plenty of chances to learn, will not be a ‘watered down’ version of what is appropriate with four or five year olds. Good practice with very young children is influenced by what can work well in family life. Nurseries are not family homes but they can draw on many of the positive aspects of home-based learning. The best group settings have a relaxed, home-like atmosphere.

**The importance of physical care**

Physical care - that you provide and give, and that you increasingly share with a young child - is central to a well-rounded day with children under three years. Through affectionate and respectful touch you show children that, ‘I care about you as well as care for you’. The view that ‘care’ is the poor relation compared with ‘education’ has been a long-standing block to addressing quality in work with babies and toddlers.

The daily routines of care are not something to hurry through in order to move on to other activities that are seen as early learning. Physical care is an ideal vehicle for a great deal of learning. So, toddlers who feel relaxed, who have not been hustled through care routines, will be far more ready to enjoy everything else that is on offer in your setting.

**Learning through care routines**

Young children are poised to learn from any part of their day and the necessary daily routines for young children are no exception. Adults support young children’s learning when they value those routines and resist any temptation to rush through them or pay them scant attention.

- Changing time for babies and toddlers can be an ideal opportunity for an exchange of smiles and a simple conversation, even when the baby’s contribution is sounds and gurgles, rather than recognisable words. Babies often recognise and enjoy their own familiar song or a verbal ritual.
- Babies and toddlers feel secure and cherished by respectful physical care – an essential underpinning for their future learning.
- Young children start to share in their own care of dressing, feeding, toileting and looking after their environment. With support, this long drawn out process can also be a source of learning in physical skills, communication, simple forward planning and understanding a sequence.
- Children’s development is also supported when they feel part of the routines that make each day run smoothly.
- Young children experience a personal satisfaction in being a helper to adults and other children. They appreciate thanks in words and a smile and to be able to say, ‘I did that’ or ‘I helped’.
- Ordinary routines can support children’s all round learning and development. For example, when children are part of tidying up, they learn about simple time management, putting objects back into their right place and working together with
other children.
- Their involvement in mealtimes can give practice in numbers for laying the table and physical skills with visual co-ordination are needed to help a friend to another helping of vegetables.
- Young children often chat when they are part of a shared domestic activity with an adult or perhaps one other child. Very young children learn better when they feel they have a trusted role to play within the daily routines. There may be some routines that you do yourself for safety reasons, but there are many in which children can be involved. Your adult contribution is to value this activity as a source of learning and allow enough time so that children can practise their skills and gain in confidence.

**Fun with physical movement**

The research into early brain development has confirmed how the actual practice of crawling, handling, looking and communicating builds the neural connections in young brains. If you watch them, it becomes obvious that babies and toddlers have a very strong drive to use their bodies and to apply their current muscle control to the utmost. They need safe space for moving around and often the best area will be on a comfortable floor, with adults willing to be there as well: watching, joining in the play or letting children crawl all over you. Once they are independently mobile, older babies and toddlers engage in a great deal of physical play and sheer joy in using their skills. They need space to move about and hone their skills: to crawl, walk, learn balance, climb, bounce, jump and chase. Physical skills are part of lively games with other children and adults, enjoyable chasing about and clambering on suitable equipment. Toddlers’ use of wheeled toys is a handy reminder of how play equipment can support so many different kinds of learning. A wheeled trolley can be pushed along by a toddler who finds the trolley gives a useful balance to the walking. But soon the trolley is used to carry around teddies, bricks or other small children. If a young child sits in the trolley it may become a car or a bus and she or he is the driver, perhaps with an imaginary driving wheel. It is becoming clear that physical development is just as important as intellectual development and communication.

- Crawling and creeping by older babies and toddlers help them directly to synchronise their sense of balance, bringing together the physical sensations and what they see.
- These skills enable a child to recognise what it feels like to be in balance or about to lose their balance.
- The co-ordination of moving hands and vision in crawling is undertaken at the same distance that children will use some years later in reading and writing.
- So, apart from being enjoyable now, crawling games are a basis for future learning, because young children strengthen their limbs and practise co-ordination of movement and vision.

Young children need to move and they can look and listen when they are using physical skills. Under threes find it hard to stay still and making them sit ‘properly’ too soon can disrupt rather than help their powers of concentration. It is perfectly possible to learn on the move.
Their best method of learning is hands on, supported by a variety of play resources and access to ordinary objects. We need to reflect seriously on whether, and in what ways, under threes have access to computers. A number of companies aggressively promote computer software for toddlers, with the message that earlier must be better. Bear in mind that such marketing drives are motivated by commercial interests, not by a sound understanding of early child development.

Young children have plenty of time to become computer literate and under threes do not yet have the understanding of their social world to make sense of screen images. Computers are part of ordinary life now, so there is no need to keep under threes completely away from them, if they are genuinely interested to look. However, there is no evidence of a learning advantage when computers are pushed into the daily life of under threes. On the contrary there are strong reasons for concern that such experience will detract from essential hands-on learning, real life exploration, social interaction with real children and adults and essential practice of their physical skills.

**Play for the senses**

Young children want to make things happen and to work out how their world works. They use all their senses and apply their current physical skills to objects of interest. Their learning grows from the simple physical explorations of being able to get hold of objects and to experiment with actions.

- Mobile babies and toddlers learn through a fair amount of repetition and by using similar actions on different materials. In the first year of life, babies learn ways to explore objects as their physical skills extend.
- Holding and mouthing are the first methods of exploration. But once babies manage a secure hold, they stare and inspect something of interest.
- With better physical co-ordination and vision, they explore by hitting or tapping, shaking, poking, tearing, rubbing, dropping and throwing.
- All babies do not use every method and some are more enthusiastic for one method than others. Some actions like dropping or throwing develop into a shared game with an adult or older child.

Very young children have no sense of danger, nor of what are, or are not, playthings. So they need watching but babies also need a safe source of play materials that vary in look, feel, sound making qualities and texture. Young children nowadays are as interested as ever in ordinary household objects like cardboard boxes and the delight of saucepans and a wooden spoon. Elinor Goldschmied’s ideas of the treasure basket and heuristic play emerged from her concern that exploratory learning could be lost when children are restricted to commercially made playthings.

Toddlers like hands-on activities, such as play dough, simple sticking and drawing, printing, using crayons and finger paints. These play activities support their physical skills, imagination and ability to plan ahead a little. Toddlers learn from doing an art and craft activity and do not necessarily produce something at the end. They may want to experiment rather than produce a final painting or print and sometimes pleasure in the materials means that a neat final product does not emerge.

**Let’s pretend**

Toddlers in the second year of life often show the beginning of imagination that will develop into the complex pretend play of a three and four year old. Very young children take what they know of familiar life and routines and then play around with
The very first pretend play actions are often fleeting. Perhaps a toddler uses a toy spoon to pretend to feed himself or a brush and pretend to brush his hair, scarcely touching his head.

Pretend play is at first directed by toddlers at themselves, but soon they pretend with someone or something else. They pretend to offer you a drink or to feed Teddy.

They start to pretend an object is something else, for example, a brick is a car or a plastic bowl is a hat.

Perhaps the whole action is pretend; there is not only no drink, the drinking action is made without a cup. Toddlers look at you as if to say, ‘You know that I know that you know that this is all just pretend’.

Two and three year olds show ever more complex pretend play. They may develop longer sequences as dolly is put to bed or the toy animals have a tea party.

Doll’s house size figures and small world play with animals become possible, because the children now understand that these little figures can stand in for the full size version.

Children dress up and begin to play pretend with friends, perhaps monsters or chase and rescue. They cook pretend meals and play with a pretend shop or garage.

Children draw from what they know in everyday life to feed their pretend play. You will see and hear how they build in what they experience in family life, saw on a local trip or recall from a favourite television programme.

Books and stories
Babies like books as something to look at and share with an adult or an older sibling. Interesting illustrations and a story read or told with enthusiasm lay strong foundations for later literacy. Good books for very young children do not have long stories, so you can relax and enjoy the detail.

Children like a story read or told to the pictures with plenty of expression in the words and your face.

They enjoy dramatic pauses and repeating phrases that they can say as well. Even very young children start to anticipate and join in.

Books with detailed photographs or illustrations can be a good basis for spotting games. A young child will enjoy looking and finding a character, an animal or some other detail.

Young children’s request to have a story ‘again’ is ideally suited for their learning. The repetition helps them to recall favourites and sometimes to tell themselves the story as they turn to pages.

Music and rhymes
Children enjoy music making, dancing to music and rhymes with hand movements. This kind of play is supportive of their physical skills including balance, attention and hearing. These activities also support active memory, as children become able to recognise a familiar piece of music or the opening notes of their favourite dance song. Nursery rhymes and chants are enjoyable for young children at the time but also support future learning. The familiar sequence of words and hand movements helps children’s communication and memory. Saying rhymes is often pleasurable for
children, because they begin to anticipate what is coming in a familiar rhyme. They feel confident to request favourites by words or the accompanying gestures. Plenty of experience with nursery rhymes also helps children understand sounds and sound patterns in a way that supports their learning to read and write in later years. Experience with nursery rhymes appears to tune children into the details of the many sounds that make up language.

**Out and about**

Outdoor play is important for all children and there is a growing awareness that this source of learning should not be seen as somehow less valuable than sit down activities. Play outside for young children gives them the chance to use their physical skills in moving around, exploring the farther reaches of the garden and using appropriate outdoor equipment. More energetic and noisy games of chase, hide and seek are often more possible outside.

Even small outdoor areas also have great potential for children to explore flowers and little creatures. Toddlers can be enchanted by puddles, spiders’ webs and unexpected creepy crawlies under stones. They can also be enthusiastic diggers and, with some guidance, gardeners.

Babies and toddlers need to get out and about in your local environment and everyone needs a change of scene. Although a local circuit may seem boring to you, there is plenty to interest young children. You support their learning, so long as you take your time and operate on child-focused timing, with plenty of opportunities to stop and stare. Under threes enjoy a familiar circuit in which they can recognise a regular interest spot as well as something new. Their understanding of the world is extended by events that seem unexceptional to you: posting letters, buying some fresh buns or stopping to stare at a large spider or snail.

**The vital role of adults**

For work with children, but especially with the very young, we need to focus on the relationships that adults build with children and how we value the friendships that even toddlers make with each other. When adults relate fully with babies and toddlers, then the children will learn through that relationship and feel secure to enjoy all the play materials and activities.

*The key person (worker) in nurseries*

Quality in work with babies and young children can only be delivered through a caring, personal relationship between baby or child and worker. In a group nursery, a key person system is important to link individual practitioners with individual children. The main features of this system, when it works well are:

- The same practitioner is responsible for the physical needs of a very small number of individual babies and toddlers. Very young children need to be able to recognise the face of the person who changes them, feeds them or to whom they wake from a nap. The key person can respond sensitively to individual babies and toddlers, know their preferences and develop personal rituals of songs, smiles and enjoyable ‘jokes’.

- The key person can develop a friendly relationship with the child’s parent, sharing ideas about the young child and communicating important information about the day or the baby’s state of health.

- The key person will also be the one who keeps a baby or young child’s records, in
order to track her learning and to observe.

**Partnership and shared care**

A good working relationship with parents is essential because of the importance of continuity in shared care. Partnership between parents and carers depends on open and regular communication that acknowledges the contribution of both parties and works hard to avoid any sense of competition. Regular, friendly communication is crucial to ensure continuity between parents at home and nursery over shared routines and timing any changes. Under threes manage some differences between carers but not major ones.

Conversation is the best way to keep one another up-to-date with what a baby or toddler has learned or is nearly ready to do. Ideally, practitioners and parents need to exchange what they notice and to have a shared satisfaction in the baby or toddler’s discoveries and interests.

**Development of attachment**

Early years practitioners are often concerned, or feel that parents are anxious, about young children becoming ‘too attached’ to staff. This area definitely has to be faced with children’s needs placed central:

- Babies and toddlers need to form close attachments. They cannot be ‘too attached’ to adults who are key in their daily lives. And some young children spend many hours in out of home care. They need and deserve to develop attachments to their key worker.
- Adults, practitioners and parents, need to resolve the mixed feelings that undoubtedly exist. Parents who work long hours may well be worried if their young child is clearly fond of her key worker. But these understandable feelings need to be discussed between the adults and not ‘solved’ by making it hard for young children to form attachments in out-of-home care.

In communication with parents, you might need to consider all of the following:

- Let parents know when babies and toddlers missed them or were happy to see them come back in at the end of the day. It is a delicate balance between reassuring parents that they are not forgotten and avoiding worrying them that their baby cries for ages when they are gone.
- Share what babies and toddlers have done during the day: a trip out, a song or game that was especially enjoyed, a new step in the child’s development. But make sure that you give parents plenty of space to share with you about what happens at home, and not just about problems.
- Talk with parents about how young children can care very much about more than one person. They are able to make different kinds of close relationships and they can have different special times with a small number of caring adults.
- Reassure parents that they will be the continuity in their child’s life. You are pleased to be part of the child’s time now, but parents will be there when the child has moved on from your nursery or care as a childminder.

Good practice with babies and toddlers has to start and continue with a focus on the young children themselves: how they can learn, what they need now and how they will best relate to the different adults in their lives.

**Further resources on working with babies and very young children**

- Alliance for Childhood *Fool’s gold: a critical look at computers and childhood*
On the website www.allianceforchildhood.net

- Bredekamp, Sue and Copple, Carol (eds) *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programmes* (1997 NAEYC – a US publication available from the National Early Years Network tel: 020 7607 9573)
- Campbell, Robin *Literacy from home to school: reading with Alice* (1999 Trentham Books)
- Early Education *Living, loving and learning* - this booklet has some lovely photos as well as text (2000 Early Education tel: 020 7539 5400)
- Elfer, Peter; Goldschmied, Elinor and Selleck, Dorothy *A key person in the nursery: building relationships for quality provision* (2002 National Early Years Network)
- Goldschmied, Elinor and Jackson, Sonia *People under three: young children and day care* (1994 Routledge)
- Gopnik, Alison; Meltzoff, Andrew and Kuhl, Patricia *How babies think: the science of childhood* (1999 Weidenfeld and Nicholson)
- Henry, Margaret *Young children, parents and professionals: enhancing the links in early childhood* (1996 Routledge)
- Karmiloff-Smith, Annette *Baby it's you: a unique insight into the first three years of the developing baby* (1994 Ebury Press - out of print now but well worth tracking on the library shelves)
- Lindon, Jennie *Understanding child development* (1998 Thomson Learning)
- Lindon, Jennie *Helping babies and toddlers learn: a guide to good practice with under threes* (2000 National Early Years Network)
- Lindon, Jennie, Kelman, Kevin and Sharp, Alice *Play and learning for the under threes* (2001 Nursery World/TSL Education)
- Lindon, Jennie, Kelman, Kevin and Sharp, Alice The under threes series monthly in *Nursery World* - child development and many ideas of activities for under threes
- Manolson, Ayala *You make the difference in helping your child to learn* (1995 The Hanen Centre, distributed in the UK by Winslow tel: 0845 921 1777)
- Roberts, Rosemary *Self esteem and early learning* (2002 Paul Chapman)
- Shore, Rima *Rethinking the brain* (1997 Families and Work Institute – a US publication but available from Community Insight tel: 01793 512612)

**Videos**

- *Baby it’s you* (Woodside Promotions tel: 01372 805000)
- *Communication between babies in their first year* (Book and video from National
Children’s Bureau tel: 020 7843 6000)

- Infants at work: babies of 6-9 months exploring everyday objects and Heuristic play with objects: children of 12-20 months exploring everyday objects (National Children’s Bureau)
- The High/Scope approach for under threes (High/Scope UK tel: 020 8676 0220)
- Tuning into children (Book and video from National Children’s Bureau)
- A series of videos from PEEP Learning together with babies also Learning together with ones (twos, threes and fours) from the PEEP centre, Peers School, Littlemore, Oxford OX4 6JZ tel: 01865 779779)

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