

Characteristics of Effective Learning

We know that from our own experience observing family and friends that children, and indeed adults, learn in different ways. When planning and supporting children we think it is important to consider the different ways children learn and reflect this in how we teach and organise our learning environment and support individual children and groups of children. Within the Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage they identify three “Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning”; these characteristics encompass children from birth to the end of the reception year and children will demonstrate them in different ways depending on the developmental level of the child:

1. **Playing and exploring** – children investigate and experience things and “have a go”.
2. **Active learning** – children concentrate and keep on trying if they encounter difficulties and enjoy their achievements.
3. **Creativity and thinking critically** – children have and develop their own ideas and make links between ideas. They develop strategies for doing things.

Playing and exploring

This characteristic is divided into 3 aspects; finding and exploring, playing with what they know and being willing to have a go.

Finding and exploring

At home and at nursery children are demonstrating skills in this area when they are being curious about the objects, people and places they come into contact with. They are using all their senses (what they see, hear, smell, touch and taste) to explore the world around them and showing special interests in things. For instance, if you are a baby you might become fascinated by the feeling of different materials (silky ribbon, fur fabric, smooth bendy plastics); a child entering nursery might be fascinated by buildings or holes in the road, stopping to watch road works and asking lots of questions of parents/key person about what the people are doing and wanting to look in books or on the computer about how buildings are made. Children may engage in activities that we call “open ended”, meaning they can stretch and extend their play using different materials not always dictated by an adult and this may continue over a number of hours, days or even weeks.

Playing with what they know

This aspect links very closely with children’s ability to “pretend” and to engage in pretend experiences alone and as they grow and develop these ideas in co-operation with others. At home and at school children use one object to represent another, for example, a toddler may pick up a brick and use it as a mobile phone to talk to “mummy”. As children develop, they become more sophisticated and create their own props for role play e.g. making a superhero tool belt and extending their play through assigning particular roles to individual children. They can sustain this play and develop ideas and themes which they continue over a period of time. They might also incorporate ideas from home but are increasingly informed by books and stories “I am the troll and you are baby troll...so we have to wait for him to go over the “trip-trap” bridge.”

Being willing to “have a go”

Children who exhibit this characteristic start up activities and have ideas. They seek out things to challenge them and are keen to show they “can do” things independently. They are willing to try and are keen to (or can be encouraged to) try new experiences. A baby may “try and try” to pick up a small object to drop in into a box, a toddler will persist with carrying their buggy up and down a set of steps to take their baby to the “shops” showing real purpose and being very tenacious despite obstacles in their way. We want to encourage this in our youngest children so they can feel a sense of success and have a positive view of themselves as learners.

Active Learning

This characteristic is divided into 3 aspects: being involved and concentrating, keeping on trying and enjoying what they set out to do.

Being involved and concentrating

Many children at whatever age can and do show high levels of focus in things that really interest them. They can get really involved in an activity or experiences and cannot easily be distracted. They look very closely at things and pay particular attention to the features of the objects, people and places they find fascinating.

Keeping on trying

This aspect links quite closely with being willing to “have a go” but also involves demonstrating persistence when difficulties arise. Children show a positive attitude and will not be put off by difficulties or challenges. We can encourage this characteristic by allowing children the opportunity to do things for themselves and not jumping in too soon. Observing and offering help when challenges arise and judging carefully when to offer support.

Encouraging children to learn new things and to have a positive attitude to all new learning opportunities is important. Children need to be able to talk about the benefits of “having a go” and “keeping on trying” and to be able to work alongside interested adults who can help them reflect on overcoming the things they have found challenging and on what they have learned from these challenges.

Enjoying achieving what they set out to do

Children at home and at school demonstrate this when they show real satisfaction with what they have done and have enjoyed new learning for its own sake not because they are seeking praise or because the end result is “perfect” or they have achieved the “right answer”. Children revel in the learning for its own sake. For very young children this is often seen in physical accomplishments babies who have learnt to stand and walk will love to “cruise” around and show real pleasure in their new found skill. Older children who have mastered “swinging across the monkey bars” will do so, again and again showing real joy in mastering a new skill. We need to value and record these aspects of learning and help children reflect on them. Parent ‘wow’ stickers are especially important here to

record achievements at home (achievements children are really proud of) and to share these with nursery.

Creating and thinking critically

This characteristic is divided in to having their own ideas, making links and choosing ways to do things

Having their own ideas

If you observe children and ask them to explain their thinking they are frequently engaged in thinking of their own ideas, solving problems and finding new ways to do things. We teach children specific problem solving skills e.g. breaking a task into smaller steps but we also give them time, space and offer age appropriate challenges that require them to find their own ways to do things. We also model being a thinker “we don’t always have the answer” or we might not always “settle on the first answer” we need to show that we are puzzled and we use the language involved in thinking, such as, “Idea” “make sense” “plan” “confused” “find out” or “work out”. Challenges might require specialist resources or it may involve setting a challenge” We are going to change the role play into a café how shall we do that? What will we need? How are we going to make it happen?”. It may also involve discussion or modelling an alternative “What do you do when your friend wants to look at the same book as you? Has anyone got any other ideas? What could you do?”

Making links

This aspect looks at the way children seek to make links in their learning, look for patterns, make predictions and test ideas. They may also group things, sequence objects or ideas and explore ideas involved in cause and effect. To take a simple example e.g. rolling an object ...children have lots of experience of rolling; rolling around themselves, rolling soft balls, rolling objects through paint/gloop/ soap flakes, rolling wooden toys, pushing or rolling buggies up and down the ramps. As children get older they can experience rolling cars down guttering, rolling balls through the long pipes, rolling objects through and along the large hollow blocks and planks, rolling/sliding down the large ramp and peddling the two wheeled bike very fast down the fast track at the adventure playground. All of these experiences involve making links in children’s learning and each stage strengthens and builds on children’s understanding. A younger child may not have the words to explain “faster” “quicker” “slower” “steeper” all of which are involved in discussing gradients and how things roll but children need to have tested, explored and linked these ideas together and to have been taught the correct vocabulary to develop their ideas.

Choosing ways to do things

All children whatever their age and level of competency can take control, to a lesser or greater extent, over how they want to approach or complete a task. This approach extends from simple tasks such as learning to feed yourself right through to writing a complex story using the correct spelling and punctuation. We expect and support children to be independent and to choose ways to tackle things. Children are provided with the opportunity to plan how to tackle something, to talk about how they went about it and to reflect on the possible challenges and how they were overcome.

We believe in “valuing the process not the product”. It doesn’t have to be the “perfect” drawing/ painting/model/story/number sentence/first attempt at climbing the tree but it is important that children

have been motivated to set about it themselves, put in effort and energy, “had a go” and that in turn they can think about what might be different next time.