



Key messages

- In addition to their genetic make-up, the environments in which children grow up also have a strong influence on what they do and can accomplish.
- Each child's experiences add up to a unique combination that they carry with them on their learning journey.
- Children's needs differ according to genetic factors, cultural practices, social trends and their many experiences. When these needs are clearly identified we can create an environment that enhances learning and development.
- Children must be able to relate new experiences to the unique blend of experiences that they have already encountered.
- Most children will follow the same broad routes but must be able to find their own individual pathways along the way.
- It is important to keep the learning journey smooth at times of transition when changes are greatest.
- Working together with children, families and other professionals enables settings to create learning environments that best provide for the needs of all children.
- The learning environment should support children working and playing together, as well as good relationships between adults and children.
- Working together with parents helps practitioners to identify what is necessary for each child at any time.
- Working together with other professionals and community groups, in the interests of young children, enables settings to create contexts for learning that benefit all children.

What Supporting Every Child means

Children are born with a genetic blueprint that maps their growth, but their learning and development are not fixed. The environments in which children grow up have a strong influence on what they do and can accomplish. These environments are made up of a multitude of different influences such as places, cultures and people that each child comes into contact with from day to day, month to month and year to year.

Together these add up to a unique pattern of experiences from which children learn and which they carry with them as they move from one experience or situation to another. Progress along the way is often described as a learning journey. It is unique to each child because it is built up from their individual mix of life's experiences. For an environment to support learning it must be responsive to and influential in supporting each child's learning journey.

Why Supporting Every Child is important

Children's needs

Children's needs differ according to their genetic make-up and life experiences but there are some basic needs that are vital for all children to be able to thrive and learn well. All children need to feel comfortable, warm, well fed, safe and loved. To meet these basic needs, the learning environment should provide children with caring, responsive and knowledgeable key people to be with and learn from. When children feel safe and know that there is someone that they can depend upon, they develop confidence to tackle new challenges and are prepared to take risks. They explore and experiment, relate well to others and are independent but will seek help when necessary.

Beyond basic needs, all children have their own needs that arise from a combination of genetic factors, cultural practices, social trends and many experiences. Children's individual identities develop from the expectations of their families, culture and the society in which they live. They need to know who they are and how they belong in whatever situation they find themselves, if they are to feel valued, confident and good about themselves. All of children's experiences contribute to their sense of self, their disposition to learn and their understanding of the world around them. We must expect differences in what they know, can do and feel and we should be ready and enthusiastic contributors to each of their learning journeys.

The bedrock of enabling learning is to create an environment that is flexible and varied enough to respect and respond to individual needs. For example, some children may be very fluent and respond readily to suggestions that they construct stories in their imaginative play. Others may be shy but equally capable of composing narratives with the support of role-play that reflects their interests, and additional reassurance and encouragement.

It is vital to talk with parents about the needs of children whose development is giving cause for concern, as parents and children may need extra support to promote their children's developing capabilities. Where needs are clearly identified and understood, both people and resources can be harnessed to create an environment that enhances learning and development.

The learning journey

Children seek to make sense of their experiences and they need to be able to relate what they encounter to the unique blend of experiences that they have previously met. This does not mean that change has to be resisted or that all provision must be individualised. Some aspects of the learning journey will be the same for most children. Most follow similar patterns of development and can follow the same broad routes. At the same time, the uniqueness of each child's experience, development and learning means that they must be able to find their own individual pathways when necessary.

To foster progress, settings should create an environment that achieves a balance between providing enough of the familiar to reassure, while presenting enough of the new to stimulate and extend. Children delight in something new if there are things that they can latch on to and build upon. They also like to do what others are doing and learn greatly from their peers. If the learning environment reflects a range of family, cultural and gender differences in its resources, its ways of speaking and its behaviours, all children will feel that they are valued and that they belong. In these circumstances they are likely to respond to challenges and differences with enthusiasm.

It is particularly important to keep the journey smooth at points of transition when changes are greatest and can be daunting. This involves maintaining the principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in each setting, understanding children's needs and creating an environment that provides variety. When the environment is organised to enable children to develop autonomy in learning, children are able to choose things that they enjoy and can do. As they settle down and feel comfortable, adults can stimulate interest in other things and extend the breadth and depth of their experience and learning.

Working together

Working together with children, families and other professionals enables settings to create learning environments that best provide for the needs of all children. Where settings and families work together to identify and meet children's needs, they can create dynamic and secure contexts for learning in which children's particular needs are catered for.

The learning environment should support children working and playing together, as well as good relationships between adults and children. Babies and young children learn well through their interactions within supportive adult-child relationships. They also learn a lot from their relationships with other children and are motivated to learn when doing things together. They are fascinated by the things they see other children doing and are keen to join in and try things. Toddlers often try to copy what they have seen older children doing and need the kind of sensitive support that balances encouragement of their exuberant efforts with keeping them safe.

By working together with parents, practitioners can identify what is necessary for each child at any particular time, and this keeps settings in tune with day to day and family events, as well as special occasions that children experience at home. This helps to create a learning environment that includes and provides for interaction with parents, and connects and builds upon children's experience by helping practitioners and parents to understand each other better and to share their knowledge.

Working together with other professionals and community groups, in the interests of young children, enables settings to create contexts for learning that benefit all children, while catering for the particular needs of individuals or groups. For example, a sensory room or area may be designed to meet a child's special needs while offering all children opportunities to explore and investigate light, colour, texture or sound in imaginative and stimulating ways.

Effective practice in relation to Supporting Every Child

Children's needs

- Organise routines and work patterns so that children spend as much time as possible with people that they are close to and with whom they have developed good relationships.
- Provide routine and rhythm to the day to help children to feel secure in knowing what and when things happen.
- Support children's developing autonomy in learning by organising resources so that they are easily accessible.
- Where children are exposed to risks, such as poverty and community violence, assess the needs of the child and family carefully. Always be sure to identify strengths as well as weaknesses in family circumstances and relationships.
- At times of transition, use the information that you receive about children's achievements and needs to plan an environment for learning that will best enable them to make progress. Use what you know about their preferences and abilities when organising activities.

The learning journey

- Provide a varied range of learning experiences that give children opportunities to find their own learning pathways.
- Organise resources so that children can manage them independently. This frees your time to work alongside them to support their learning.

- Organise staffing so that there are plenty of occasions when adults work with individuals and small groups of children, to develop and sustain good relationships. Interactions within respectful relationships enable adults to learn about children's thinking and needs and children to learn to connect their ideas and acquire new skills.
- Ensure that displays and resources reflect children's home communities and the wider world so that they can feel secure in knowing that they belong and have confidence to meet challenges.
- When children move from nursery to Reception, and especially when they move from Reception to Year 1, think about what they will find the same and what will be different. Consider activities, resources, layout, the adults and children they will be with as well as what and how they will be learning to help you understand how children's previous experiences relate to the new situation. This will enable you to organise and target support and encouragement where it is most needed.

Working together

- Involve children in planning the week's activities by asking them what they would like to do and adapt your own ideas to incorporate theirs. This enables plans to be developed and delivered in ways that are meaningful and relevant to children.
- Organise the environment to support children's interactions with other children; for example, having play vehicles that carry two or more children or by encouraging several children to create 3D models together.
- Place great store on learning from parents about their children's needs and be sensitive to particular practices, interests or anxieties. Consider how to maintain or adapt policies in such circumstances as a three- or four-year-old relying on a dummy, or an older child not being toilet trained.
- Consider how your assessments and records might best incorporate contributions from parents and be regularly shared with them.
- Suggest to parents how some of the setting's activities might be carried on at home. Similarly, use experiences at home to develop learning in the setting.

Further resources

DfES (2005) *Celebrating Young Children, and Those who Live and Work With Them*, DVD and booklet, DfES Publications, Nottingham (ref. DfES-1211-2005DVD).

QCA (2005) *Continuing the Learning Journey: INSET package*, QCA, London (ref. QCA/05/1590).