

How to use this book

Working with young children is one of the most rewarding, important and challenging jobs you can do. Whether you are establishing routines, creating a supportive and stimulating environment or responding to the many different personalities of the children, there are a seemingly endless number of day-to-day tasks and responsibilities for the early years practitioner. This book sets out to offer some support in these areas. If you can sort out the 'fundamentals' of your setting, everything else should follow on effortlessly.

There is no magic formula for creating the perfect early years setting. There are, however, a number of ideas, approaches and routines that you can try in the ever-evolving task of running your setting. Perhaps you want to re-organize your snack time routine, increase the children's access to the garden or explore different ways of responding to disagreements. Check the relevant chapter in this book and try out some of the suggestions.

The term 'early years setting' covers many different types of establishment for the three to five age group. You may work in a privately run nursery school or a nursery class attached to a maintained primary school. You may be based in a large urban day-care centre or run a small village playgroup. Given that every setting is unique, the ideas, routines and suggestions in this book are described in general terms. They may work for you as they stand, or you may need to adapt an idea to suit the unique nature of your setting. Always bear in mind that the most successful practitioners are able to take the kernel of an idea and make it their own. Whenever you introduce something new, observe the children closely and adjust your approach until it works for you, your children and your setting.

Who is this book for?

This book is aimed at anyone who works in a Foundation stage early years setting.

- **Students:** if you are a student practitioner, this book will give you lots of tips and techniques to try out during your practice; for example, the practicalities of planning group activities, managing behavioural challenges, supervising mealtimes or

helping children with basic routines such as hand-washing. If you are working towards a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in any aspect of childcare, this book may also help you provide evidence for your portfolio.

- **Inexperienced practitioners:** if you are a newly qualified practitioner, this book will offer lots of ideas and approaches to help you develop your practice. Although you will not be responsible for overall management, you should be involved in planning and decision making. Having an overview of the early years setting is always useful, and this book will give you some idea of the breadth and range of organization that goes into running a pre-school group.
- **Setting managers and experienced practitioners:** if you are an experienced practitioner, or establishing a new early years setting, this book will give you various ideas to try and sample routines to compare with your own practices. The book also makes a useful reference to lend to new staff and students.

What is included in each chapter?

Each chapter is divided into three broad areas (see contents page). Each chapter also contains **Information Links**, **Curriculum Guidance** and **Case Studies**.

Information Links

The book looks at a number of topics from different angles – for example, you will find information on responding to anger or aggression in Chapters 1, 2 and 6. Where this is the case, the ‘Information Links’ text boxes will direct you to other relevant sections in the book.

Curriculum Guidance

Everything you do in the early years setting helps to fulfil the **Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage** (QCA, 2000), whether you are talking through a disagreement, showing children how to pour a drink or planning a ‘child-friendly’ cloakroom. The ‘Curriculum Guidance’ sections demonstrate how different routines, approaches and ideas meet the requirements of the Stepping Stones and Early Learning Goals. Each Stepping Stone is coded with its colour and the initials ‘ss’. Each Early Learning Goal is coded with the initials ‘ELG’ and codes are also used to indicate which of the six Areas of Learning the goals come from:

PSED – Personal, Social and Emotional Development;

CLL – Communication, Language and Literacy;

KUW – Knowledge and Understanding of the World;

MD – Mathematical Development;

PD – Physical Development;

CD – Creative Development.

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Case Studies

Case studies have been included throughout the book to illustrate various different scenarios and situations. Each case study is based on a real event, although the names of both children and adults have been changed to protect their identity. The case studies also include a summary to highlight what they show in terms of both good and bad practice.

Further Reading

At the end of the book, there is a reading list. If you want more in-depth information on areas such as garden play, observation, toileting or any other topic covered in the book, this is where you will find suggestions for useful titles.

Special needs

Supporting children with special needs is an essential part of your role and responsibility as an early years practitioner. Apart from the value of inclusion for all children, you may find yourself in breach of legislation if you refuse to accept a child based on disability and/or special needs. It lies beyond the scope of this book to look in depth at special needs provision. However, where appropriate, there are general references to the importance of supporting children with special needs, observing their progress and adjusting your provision to better meet their requirements. For anyone who requires more detailed information, the Further Reading list at the end of this book includes titles on the autistic spectrum, dyspraxia, AD/HD, supporting special needs in general and writing and implementing Individual Education Plans.

The importance of observation

Throughout the book, you will find **Observation Notes**. These sections highlight some of the most important elements to look out for, linked to the different topics covered in each chapter. They also include relevant points from the **Foundation Stage Profile** assessment scales (QCA, 2003).

Observation and assessment are central to everything that you do in the early years setting. It is observation that tells you what levels children have reached in all aspects of their learning and development; what provision they need in order to progress; how the group is functioning as a whole and whether or not your setting is supporting or hindering the children. Having taken observations, it is essential that you then assess what you have seen, in order to match your provision to the needs of the child. Your observations should also be at the core of record keeping and completing the Foundation Stage Profile.

When making observations, it is important to distinguish between **summative** assessment and **formative** assessment. **Summative** assessment summarizes what level of development the child has reached at a given moment. It is useful for record keeping and providing information for parents' reports. **Formative** assessment informs you of

what the child needs in order to progress. Formative assessment should always be at the basis of targeted provision in the early years setting.

Observation and assessment are complex procedures and there are many different methods and approaches.

- **Targeted observations:** these are planned observations where you watch a particular child and note down as much information as possible. It is essential to stand back and not become involved during a targeted observation. Let colleagues deal with any incidents so that you can remain focused on your observation. Many books recommend observing for 5 to 15 minutes, but if you can manage longer, you will gain a much more comprehensive profile. Aim to observe each child in the setting at least once a term. You can also use targeted observation if you have a particular concern about a child and need to gather information. Try to be as neutral as possible; write down the facts of what you see and hear, rather than your subjective judgement. Once the observation is complete, analyze your notes and look for patterns of behaviour, how the child relates to other children and adults, how independently the child operates within the environment, levels of concentration and demonstration of skills and knowledge in all six Areas of Learning.
- **Tracking:** 'tracking' is a form of targeted observation. It can be particularly useful for gathering information about a child who has difficulty settling or engaging with activities. Make a plan of the setting and observe the child during a free choice activity period. Note what they are attracted to and how long they spend on each activity. Always remember that the purpose of tracking is not to 'prove' that a child's behaviour is negative, but to look for ways in which you might support that child.
- **Incidental observations:** incidental observations are little snippets of information that you pick up throughout the day. They can include anything that might be useful to add to the child's record, such as a child engaging with a particular activity or one child helping another. Keep a block of post-it notes™ close at hand so that you can write down anything of interest and stick it straight into the child's records.
- **Observing routines and areas of the setting:** observe the children as they participate in routines such as hand-washing, laying tables for lunch or using the painting easel. How well do they cope with these routines? If they are struggling, what adjustments might make the routine more manageable? Plan to observe each area of the setting throughout the year. Look out for the most and least popular activities, and whether the children are able to use the area independently. Based on your observations, you can then adapt the area to make it more 'child friendly' if necessary.

Choosing when to make your observation is another important consideration. If you have planned a targeted observation because a child is unsettled at the start of the session or having difficulties in the garden, you will obviously need to choose the relevant time and place. For more general observations, aim to observe during a range of situations, including:

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- free choice activity time, both indoors and outdoors
- planned large and small group activities
- regular routines such as lunchtimes, hand-washing or getting ready to go home.

This is just a brief summary of some of the main observational methods you can use. For more detailed information on observation, assessment, record keeping and the **Foundation Stage Profile**, see Further Reading.