

# Identifying learning in the Early Years

When communicating with parents, practitioners need not just to describe what children have done, but also what they have learned. **Chris Quigley** explains.



**O**fsted highlights in its 2010 annual report that the quality of childcare provision is weakest in the most deprived areas<sup>1</sup>. The relative weakness in building skills for the future in the most vulnerable children is a particular concern.

Ofsted recognises that, despite the problems, many providers give good or outstanding childcare, even in areas of high deprivation. These providers have an excellent understanding of child development and the Early Years Foundation Stage, which was introduced in recognition of the importance of early development in a child's chances of later success.

## Engaging with parents

The report highlights that, although rarely inadequate, only 36% of providers engage satisfactorily with parents. Providers often focus more on children's personal development and welfare than on learning. This is reflected in the information shared with parents, which is not sufficiently focused on children's individual learning and development.

Communication with parents or carers about progress is often informal and oral, with no reference to the range of records or communication tools used by outstanding



providers. As a result, parents cannot easily access information about their child's assessment and, in some instances, are not aware that this even exists. Parents are often not consulted about their child's progress at home or involved in identifying the child's next steps in learning. In a number of cases there are no clear systems for parents to contribute to their child's assessments.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, where the quality of work with parents is outstanding, support for a child's learning and development is genuinely shared. Children in this category are very well placed to continue their learning at home.<sup>3</sup>

## Engaging with children's learning

Erica Mason and I wrote the guide *Key Skills in the Early Years*<sup>4</sup> in response to growing concerns from practitioners on three matters.

First was how to focus observations on the learning and progress made by young children rather than simply on their activities. Second was the lack of clarity in defining the difference between the provision of childcare and learning. Third was the absence of a time efficient, but meaningful assessment system that provided both practitioners and parents with the key information they needed to help children succeed.

Our book is designed to help practitioners observe and describe the learning and progress children make throughout the Early Years. It charts children's learning and progress through Key Skills, the essential skills children need in order to make progress in their development. They are derived from the Early Learning Goals – the nationally expected level of development for children aged five. Each of the key skills has been exemplified with development progression statements from 22 to 60 months. This helps to focus observation on the key skills in each area of learning, so that providers can comment on children's learning rather than just on the activity in which they are engaged.

As an Ofsted inspector, I found that many comments practitioners were making about children were actually a description of what children had been doing. For example, one comment read, 'This is Ben enjoying building a tower from blocks'. This tells neither parents nor practitioners anything of any value in relation to Ben's learning. A provider, who used the information in the Key Skills materials, would identify what Ben was learning with greater clarity. For instance:

- This is Ben constructing and modifying
- This is Ben initiating ideas
- This is Ben maintaining attention
- This is Ben investigating and finding out
- This is Ben asking questions
- This is Ben using imagination.

Not only does this approach give practitioners a clearer understanding of what Ben is learning, it also provides parents with valuable information. Many parents in the most deprived areas simply do not know what their children are expected to achieve in the Early Years. It is vital, therefore, that information given by the childcare provider is clear and focused on learning. This teaches parents what to look for in their own interactions with their child.

## Identify Key Skills

The book identifies 58 Key Skills, set out in the table below, which cover all areas of learning.

### Overview of the Key Skills

Personal, Social and Emotional Development	Communication, Language and Literacy	Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy	Knowledge and Understanding of the World	Physical Development	Creative Development
Disposition and Attitudes Confidence Independence Motivation Curiosity Maintaining attention Initiating ideas	Language for Communication Attentive listening Word play-Wow words Communicating clearly	Numbers as Labels and for Counting Counting reliably Solving number problems	Exploration and Investigation Investigating and finding out Asking questions	Movement and Space Moving with control	Being Creative Using imagination
Self-confidence and Self-esteem Sharing feelings Sensitivity Self-assurance	Language for Thinking Imaginative language Explaining clearly	Calculating Adding and taking away in real life situations	Designing and Making Constructing and modifying	Health and Body Awareness Knowing how to be healthy and safe	Exploring Media and Materials Using colour and texture in 2D and 3D artwork
Making Relationships Working together Taking turns and sharing Following rules and codes	Linking Sounds and Letters Hearing and saying sounds Naming and saying the letters of the alphabet Having a go at writing words Using rhyme and alliteration	Shape, Space and Measures Solving shape, space and measures problems Positional language Comparisons	ICT Using technology in learning	Using Equipment and Materials Using small equipment (fine motor control)	Creating Music and Dance Playing instruments Singing songs and rhymes Moving to music
Behaviour Understanding right and wrong Understanding the effect of our behaviour on others	Reading Retelling stories Reading common words Understanding stories Finding information		Time Talking about the past and present		Developing Imagination and Imaginative Play Imaginative play
Self-care Independence	Writing and Handwriting Writing letters accurately Writing simple words Writing for different purposes Writing sentences		Place Describing where we are		
Sense of Community Respecting ourselves Respecting others			Communities Knowing about others' way of life		

By applying the key skills in each area, practitioners may focus their comments more sharply on children's learning.

Parents need to understand that this is not a 'shopping list' of skills to get through as quickly as possible, but a set of skills that need constant repetition in lots of different situations. As with any skill, varying levels of accomplishment will be evident over time. One can, for example, paint at a very basic level and progress to an exceptional standard given the right opportunities and guidance. The skill stays the same – painting – but the level of accomplishment has improved dramatically.

The Key Skills remain the same throughout the Early Years. Three things are necessary however, if we want our children to make progress in the skills: criteria for each stage of development, assessment

of the child's level of development and identification of the next steps for learning. As an example, the table below shows the criteria for each stage of development in the skills of curiosity and maintaining attention in Personal Social and Emotional Development:

### Personal, Social and Emotional Development - Disposition and Attitudes

Key Skills	22-36 months	30-50 months a	30-50 months b	40-60 months
<b>Curiosity</b>	Is beginning to explore setting. Showing particular preferences for places to play  Is willing to try new experiences	Is beginning to show curiosity and interest in a range of activities by watching and listening	Is curious to explore new activities or experiences independently and with some purpose.	Is curious to work out solutions and answers to activities or experiences and will maintain attention for a period of time to do this.  Ask questions in a familiar group
<b>Maintaining attention</b>	Sits independently for a short group activity, where the activity is meaningful, e.g. song/story-time	Sits independently for a short group activity with some visual/verbal prompts.	Concentrates on an activity for a short period of time.	Concentrates on activity for a sustained period of time.  Shows high levels of involvement in a self-chosen activity. Demonstrating higher levels of perseverance.  If interrupted is keen to return to an activity.  Concentrates well and listens to instructions and explanations.

The 30-50 month band has been sub divided for children between the ages of three and four.

Name	Ben			Date	23/9/10		
Child initiated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Adult directed	<input type="checkbox"/>	Area(s) of learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
				PSED	CLL	PSRN	KLW
							CD
							PO
Context for learning (sand tray/role-play etc) :							
Construction area - independent							
Observation: (Note the skill (s) the child is demonstrating)							
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>constructing and modifying</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Makes simple models using construction resources</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>							
Assessment (Developmental band)				Next steps			
22-36				Use various construction materials (30-50 months)			

Providers need to know what children are learning and their stage of development so that they can enhance provision in order to help children move towards the next stage of development.

### What Ofsted looks for

Inspectors require providers to have a secure understanding of the number of children that are at the expected level of development for their age. As no national data is available for comparison, Ofsted gives guidance to its inspectors in The Early Years Foundation Stage 2009.<sup>5</sup>

On entry to provision at the age of three, most children are likely to be working within the development matters band for 30-50 months, having shown competence in the preceding band, which covers 22-36 months. This may be referred to as the age-related expectation at the beginning of Nursery. Attainment on entry is likely to be below age-related expectations where a substantial proportion of children in a setting have not demonstrated all the elements within the 22-36 month band.

On entry to Reception at age four, most children are likely to demonstrate some of the elements of skill, knowledge and understanding within the development matters band for 40-60 months, in addition to all of the elements in the preceding, 30-50 month band. This may be referred to as the age-related expectation at the beginning of Reception. Attainment on entry is likely to be below age-related expectations where a substantial proportion of children in a setting have not demonstrated all of the elements in the 30-50 month band.

The Early Learning Goals establish a national expectation that most children should reach by the end of the Reception year.

Key Skills in the Early Years helps providers to make focused observations on children to establish their attainment on entry to the setting. There is a disk accompanying the book which contains a simple recording table to record the percentage of children at each level of development.

### Enjoy and achieve

Inspectors also need to make judgments as to how well children enjoy and achieve. To do this, they look at the progress children make towards the Early Learning Goals. By using the simple visual tables in the book, practitioners may easily make judgments as to the level of accomplishment of children in their care. The disk includes observation slips to help with this, like the one above.

As well as a means of assessment, practitioners may use the Key Skills as the basis of their planning of activities, resources and interactions with children. All of the skills may be seen as continuous objectives helping children to work towards the nationally expected level of development for five year olds.

The observation slips ask practitioners to think about the two types of next steps: those that help children to repeat their learning in another situation, or those that help them to move on to the next stage of development. The example above takes the next steps from the next level of development, which is 30-50 months. In this way, the book

is being used in three ways: firstly, to identify the learning (constructing and modifying); secondly, to assess the level of accomplishment (makes simple models using construction resources: 22-36 months); thirdly, it uses the assessment to identify the next steps to ensure children make progress (explore various construction materials: 30-50 months).

### Assess the learning of vulnerable children

Key Skills in the Early Years is about assessing learning in practice. The co-author, Erica Mason is head of a nursery in Lancashire that Ofsted recognises as outstanding. Much of her work has been based around implementing effective, simple and manageable assessment procedures that identify the needs of all children and provides informative data.

The book clarifies what 'learning' means. In doing so there is a clear distinction made between activities and learning, so that practitioners do not merely describe what

children have done but also what they have learned. It also gives valuable information to help plan for and track children's progress.

It is the most vulnerable children that would benefit most of all from a clearer understanding of child development. In many situations parents in the most deprived areas are not equipped with the knowledge to help their children to succeed so childcare providers have a vital role to play in the way they share information.

#### Chris Quigley

**Chris is an inspirational worldwide speaker and is best known for his innovative work on curriculum development, key skills and learning and assessment. He has been a Primary School Head Teacher, an Ofsted inspector and a trainer of inspectors. He is described by Ofsted as an 'outstanding leader with exceptional vision'. Chris is also a successful author in The UK and**

**internationally. His most successful publications to date include: 'Key Skills', 'Key Skills in the Early Years', 'Creative Themes for Learning' and 'How to Observe a Lesson'. Chris is passionate about children feeling clever and confident as a result of their education.**

**If you would like more information about Key Skills in the Early Years, you can download the first chapter from the free downloads page at [www.chrisquigley.co.uk](http://www.chrisquigley.co.uk). Readers interested in purchasing a copy may call 01207 279 500 and quote code ECJ01 for a £5 discount.**



1. The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2009/10, Paragraph 20
2. Paragraph 31
3. Paragraph 32
4. Key Skills in the Early Years, Chris Quigley and Erica Mason 2010, [www.chrisquigley.co.uk](http://www.chrisquigley.co.uk)
5. Guidance on the use of performance data in the early Years Foundation Stage 2009