



Including two-year-olds in schools: a briefing for school leaders

‘What children facing serious disadvantage need is high quality early education from the age of two, delivered by skilled practitioners with degrees in a setting that parents can recognise and access easily. These already exist. They are called schools’

**Sir Michael Wilshaw,
HM Inspector of Schools**

Sir Michael Wilshaw’s remarks during the launch of Ofsted’s Annual Early Years Report predictably triggered an intensive debate between supporters of school-based provision and those who worry about increasing formalisation and ‘schoolification’ in the early years.

The government’s key aim in funding provision for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds is to close the attainment gap which sees children from deprived areas at risk of falling behind from the very beginning of their school years. Leo Feinstein’s seminal research, published in 2003, painted a very gloomy picture of how children’s educational outcomes in the 1970s were shaped by social factors from their very earliest years. Feinstein found that educational outcomes were largely predicted by social class. Yet since the 1970s, there has been a growing evidence

base which demonstrates that high quality early education and care can positively influence the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children. Most notably, one of the world’s largest longitudinal studies of the effect of early education, the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project, has shown how these benefits persist through secondary schooling, impacting on the number and grades of GCSEs gained (Sylva et al, 2014).

Despite all that heated debate about whether this is best done in schools, or group settings in the private, voluntary or independent sector, or in home-based childcare, what the evidence shows us is that what really matters is not the type of setting but its quality, which is principally determined by the knowledge and qualifications of the workforce. We know that graduate- and teacher-led settings are more effective in closing the attainment gap (Mathers et al, 2014). Children from disadvantaged areas also benefit more from being in a good social mix, so setting up provision purely to deliver funded places to the most deprived two-year-olds will be less beneficial than including them in a setting with children from other backgrounds. Schools are certainly

not the only organisations which can provide this type of high-quality early education and care: but they are well-placed to do so.

So, is your school the right environment for two-year-old provision and what would you gain from offering it?

Benefits include:

- Help more children to arrive at the beginning of compulsory schooling with good levels of development
- Improve transitions
- Build stronger relationships with parents; better supported parents can more effectively support their children’s learning and development

Is it right for your school?

- Will you be fulfilling a need for high quality provision for two-year-olds in the local area?
- Will you be able to provide a social mix, for example by offering paid-for places alongside the free entitlement for disadvantaged children?
- What expertise do you have within your current Early Years team? What additional development needs will your staff have? What additional staffing will you need?

- Do you have suitable space, indoors and out, and funding for creating a suitable environment?
- How does the financial plan stack up between your capacity, likely demand and funding levels?

This briefing is intended to give senior leaders in schools a concise summary of some of the key aspects of evidence-based practice, with suggestions for useful further reading and support.

Two-year-olds are different from three- and four-year-olds

Two-year-olds often get a rough deal. They are sometimes known as the ‘terrible twos’ and told off for not being able to share and ‘play nicely’ with others. However, these perceived ills are part of their developmental stage and the fact that these children are at least a year younger than those with whom many nursery staff usually work is significant. Although two-year-olds will learn from, and often enjoy the company of older children, they tend to behave differently as they are still developing some of the skills that most three- and four-year-olds have already mastered to some extent.

They behave differently. For instance they live in the moment and are impulsive. ‘I see, I want, I take’ is often how they operate. This is developmental, and, although they need to learn to share and take turns, this is a gradual process and it is inappropriate to expect high levels of compliance and empathy with others. It is better to ensure that there are plenty of open ended resources that two-year-olds can use without constantly being expected to share.

They have different needs – some of which are basic and physical, such as:

- **Naps** – most two-year-olds will need a nap at some time during the day. Is there a quiet comfortable place for this?
- **Nappies** – most children begin to gain daytime control of their bladder and bowels between two and three. Space for nappy changing and potty training is an essential part of provision for children of this age.

So if even if you include your two-year-olds in mixed age groups you will need to ensure that they are not just coping with three- to four-year-old provision, but have some special time and provision of their own.

Emotional wellbeing: the importance of the key person

Attachment is a core process in child development. Children who have strong attachments use these relationships as secure bases from which to explore the world and show distress when parted from their attachment figures. For those two-year-olds who have never been to a setting before this may be acutely upsetting both for them and their parents, but can be greatly helped by an effective key person system. Building a relationship with the parent as well as each unique child is important. This may be done by home visits and well structured settling-in visits. However you manage the process, it needs thoughtful planning, quality time and sensitive and responsive effort in order to manage what Tassoni (2014:82) describes as ‘Settling in without tears’.

As two-year-olds get to know their key person better they will develop another attachment and will want to be near the key person and seek reassurance from them at regular intervals. Secure attachment promotes brain development and underpins secure language development as well as physical and emotional health, so it is a worthwhile investment to make sure the transition into the setting is well managed and that every member of staff who is a key person is well-supported during the process.

Parental involvement and the importance of the home learning environment

The key person relationship is a triangular one involving child, key person and parent. It is a crucial relationship in the context of two-year-olds:



‘after the age of three it becomes much more difficult to make changes in both a child’s development and in parental behaviour.’ (DfE/DH 2011)

Sylva et al’s (2010) research identified the elements of a positive home learning environment

- Warm loving relationship building
- Providing opportunities to explore
- Being child-focused and -led
- Developing communication, language and literacy

These are also important elements of a positive setting environment. When working with vulnerable two-year-olds it is very important to share skills and knowledge with parents in ways that are respectful and support parents to recognise their own children as powerful learners and themselves as key players in their child’s development and learning.

The characteristics of effective learning and the prime areas: emotional and cognitive self-regulation

The key person relationship promotes emotional wellbeing and helps children learn how to regulate their feelings and manage their behaviour. This is all part of the prime area of Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) and underpins learning. When children have a secure base and feel good about themselves they are also more easily able to regulate their own thinking and learning through the characteristics of effective early learning.

As Mathieson (2013:55) says, ‘Two-year-olds are usually extremely busy learning about everything around them. They are in many ways the embodiment of these characteristics.’ It is through playing and exploring that children engage with the world. Active learning is all about being a motivated learner able to persist in achieving one’s own goals and creating and thinking critically is where we use imagination, make links and try out strategies to become more skilled thinkers.

Play is a key context for developing learning power. All young children have a right to the balance of play, child-initiated and adult-led activities, indoors and outdoors, which meets their current needs and helps them to be strong and active learners. Two-year-olds learn best when they are following their own interests and process is much more important to them than product, so most of the provision for their play should



support child-initiated activity. It is not appropriate for adults to plan activities that two-year-olds are then forced to complete. If they are not interested they will find compliance very difficult.

Providing children with things they want to get involved in and keep on trying to do encourages active learning. Carol Dweck’s research on how we can encourage a ‘can-do’ attitude in young learners concludes that one of the most important ways to encourage children is to praise them for effort and talk with them about their learning. This encourages intrinsic motivation and persistence.

Can-do learners (those Dweck describes as having a ‘growth mindset’) don’t give up when the going gets tough, they just try to figure out what to do. In order to do this they use the creative thinking which is supported through play where children have opportunities to find their own ways to do things. Young babies can recognise patterns in experience and as we get older we become more conscious of this ability to make links and we begin to control our own thinking process – cognitive self-regulation. Language helps us to think and as two-year-olds are at the beginning of their expressive language learning journey, adults have a crucial role to play in supporting language learning by understanding how communication and language develops and monitoring each child’s progress in understanding, listening and attention and speaking. Most importantly, they need to be good listeners, picking up on each child’s interests and extending children’s language and thinking by modelling relevant and correct language just beyond the child’s current stage of development.

Communication and Language

and PSED underpin and are influenced by Physical Development. Brain and body develop together and movement is really important for two-year-olds as they learn to move and co-ordinate their bodies as well as learning about the world through movement. A good play area for two-year-olds has lots of open space both indoors and outdoors and offers different levels and varieties of surfaces with a wide range of materials to investigate. If tables and chairs are the first thing you notice when you enter an indoor space then it is not appropriate for two-year-olds. You might consider using the floor more freely and possibly providing a couple of low tables that children can sit on the floor or kneel at. Don’t be surprised when the children prefer to stand at any standard child-sized tables. Sitting on a chair – even a child-sized one – takes a lot of concentration and effort when you are two. The ability to sit totally still can take up to seven years to develop.

Community Playthings (2013) suggests that the best settings provide a dependable and flexible environment which supports play and is:

- a place to be active
- a place to relax
- a place for tactile exploration
- a place for imagination

Behaviour and schemas

Two-year-olds have a lot to learn about themselves, other people and how social rules work, but they are programmed to do just that. We are all born with certain psychological drives which shape our learning. It does not matter which country or culture we are born into, we are driven to make relationships and to be competent and autonomous.

Trying as a two-year-old to be competent means we want to repeat things – ‘again’ is often a favourite word! This is because our brain needs the repetition to build up understanding and develop concepts. These repeated patterns of behaviour are often known as schemas. Here are some common schemas.

- **Trajectory** Throwing items in various directions, climbing up and jumping off
- **Enveloping** Wrapping self in a blanket, covering whole painting with one colour, putting notes in envelopes to post
- **Enclosure** Filling and emptying containers, climbing into boxes, making dens
- **Transporting** Carrying small items round in bags and buckets, pushing other children and objects round in prams and pushchairs
- **Rotation** Rolling and being spun round, playing with wheeled toys

Children may be working with more than one schema at a time and seem driven to repeat their interest over and over again. This can be quite challenging for practitioners, but the more children are encouraged to follow their own interests, the more deep level learning is likely to occur.

Two-year-olds not only want to be competent, they want to have autonomy – to be able to do things on their own. The skilled practitioner will give them plenty of choice so that they feel in control. This can be very simple but effective in getting them to understand social rules. For instance, the child who always says ‘No!’ when told they should have a drink is more likely to respond positively when asked if they would like their drink from the purple or the yellow beaker.

Observation, Assessment and Planning: the progress check

The two-year-old progress check is based on everyday formative assessment and is carried out at any suitable time before the child is three. There is no set format, although the Know-How guide (NCB 2012) provides some useful examples and many LAs have developed their own. There is no requirement to report data to LAs and the DfE, although Ofsted will check that it has been carried out appropriately. Its aims are to:

- review a child’s development in the three prime areas of the EYFS
- ensure parents have a clear picture of their child’s development

- enable practitioners to understand the child's needs and plan activities to meet them in the setting
- enable parents to understand the child's needs and, with support from practitioners, enhance development at home
- note areas where a child is progressing well and identify any areas where progress is less than expected, and
- describe actions the provider intends to take to address any developmental concerns (including working with other professionals where appropriate). (NCB 2012:3)

Staff qualifications, training and development

Putting together your staff team will be one of the most difficult, but also most important, decisions you will make when planning to admit two-year-olds. It is now very well-evidenced that early years provision which is teacher or graduate-led is the most effective. Significantly, the EPPSE research also found that staff with lower levels of qualification

worked most effectively when they were led by a graduate or teacher. Qualified teachers will only be trained to work with two-year-olds if they have an additional qualification such as Early Years Professional Status or Early Years Teacher Status.

The minimum level of qualification recommended in the recent Nutbrown Review is an appropriate level 3 award – the Diploma in Children's and Young People's Workforce has just been replaced by a range of Early Years Educator courses. The DFE online qualification finder enables you to check whether a candidate's qualifications are considered 'full and relevant'.

In all cases, qualifications should be seen as a starting point for a person's professional development, especially if some staff are more experienced in working with older children in the EYFS. Further courses and publications may be available through your local authority, or you may choose to work with a national provider like Early Education. The EYFS statutory framework also requires all settings to offer staff regular supervision, which 'provides support, coaching

and training for the practitioner and promotes the interest of children'. Two-year-olds can present with very powerful emotions and working with their families can present complex challenges, so regular, planned supervision is essential. 'Supervision – speaking personally', an overview of one nursery school's approach, was in *Nursery World* in February 2014.

Next steps

With many LAs still struggling to place the two-year-olds eligible for funded places, and the possibility of places for all twos now on the political agenda thanks to the Lib Dems, the need for high-quality places is unlikely to go away. Not every school will, could or should pursue this option, but for those who do, there is less red tape as separate registration with Ofsted is no longer required. Information and advice is available from LAs and the government's Achieving 2 Year Olds programme, and professional support for staff is available from Early Education. Making good use of these resources can help you choose the right way forward for your school.

References and further reading

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Nursery World's special supplement on Two-Year-Olds,

including *Planning, Behaviour, Communication, Relationships, and Environments*, published on 28 June 2013 and online at www.nurseryworld.co.uk/two-year-olds

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