Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?

A good practice survey to explore perceptions of teaching and play in the early years

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector commissioned this good practice survey to gather evidence to address the recurring myth that teaching and play are separate, disconnected endeavours in the early years. Her Majesty's Inspectors visited a sample of the most successful early years providers to observe the interplay between teaching and play and evaluate the difference chosen approaches were making to the learning and development of disadvantaged children, especially funded two-year-olds. All providers, which included maintained schools, pre-schools, children's centres and childminders, were selected because they were successful in achieving good or better outcomes for children in some of the most deprived areas of the country.

Age group: 0–5

Published: July 2015

Reference no: 150085

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No. 150085

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Executive summary

Research has never been clearer – a child's early education lasts a lifetime. Securing a successful start for our youngest children, and particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, is crucial. It can mean the difference between gaining seven Bs at GCSE compared with seven Cs and is estimated to be worth £27,000 more in an individual's salary over the course of their career.[1] Such rich rewards are by no means guaranteed. When the first five years of a child's life pass by so quickly, achieving the highest quality of learning and development is critical.

For too many children, the foundations for a successful start to their education are weak. In 2014, around two fifths of children did not have the essential skills needed to reach a good level of development by the age of five. Worryingly, in our most deprived communities, the outcomes were much worse. Less than half of all disadvantaged[2] children had the skills needed to secure a positive start to school; around one quarter still struggled to speak, listen or interact socially to support better learning overall. The 19 percentage point gap between disadvantaged children and their better-off counterparts has remained unacceptably wide for too long.[3]

The early years providers we visited showed that a strong start can be the norm for all children, regardless of their background. The schools and settings in this survey focused relentlessly on developing children's communication, language and vocabulary. They provided frequent opportunities for children to practise their speaking and listening skills by providing purposeful contexts in which they could interact with others. These 'essentials' were particularly important stepping stones in allowing disadvantaged two-year-olds to catch up quickly with their more fortunate peers. Leaders in these schools and settings were clear: when narrowing the achievement gap between the rich and poor, teaching, in all its guises, matters.

The schools and settings we visited did not see teaching as separate from play or infer teaching to mean one fixed view of how things should be done. Leaders did not view their work in such black and white terms, believing that to do so would prevent the flexible approach needed when addressing young children's individual needs. Put simply, they saw teaching as the many different ways in which adults, consciously or otherwise, helped children to learn.

Parents,[4] the first teachers any child encounters, will recognise this overarching view of teaching. Every word, choice and interaction made by a parent, either in their

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[1] *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16*, Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project, Department for Education, September 2014; www.gov.uk/government/publications/influences-on-students-development-at-age-16.
[2] Throughout this report, 'disadvantaged' refers to two-year-old children who are receiving funded places in registered early years provision and those in receipt of the pupil premium funding in schools.
[3] *Statistical first release: Early years foundation stage profile (EYFSP) assessments, by pupil characteristics in England, for academic year 2013 to 2014*, Department for Education, November 2014; www.gov.uk/government/statistics/eyfsp-attainment-by-pupil-characteristics-2013-to-2014.
[4] Parents refers to parents and carers (those looking after a child) throughout the report.

child's presence or while engaging directly with them, plays a significant part in their child's learning: instilling a bedtime routine; gentle reminders to say 'please' and 'thank you' and recognising colours or textures when toddlers help to unload the washing machine all constitute teaching. These playful, everyday activities are just as much about teaching as learning the names of shapes or remembering the sounds that letters represent. Setting up teaching and play as opposites is a false dichotomy.

There is no one way to achieve the very best for young children. Many different approaches to teaching exist. Most of the providers we visited did not think of their time with children as being either teacher-led or child-initiated. They found this terminology unhelpful and sought a better way to articulate the subtleties of their work. They saw their approaches to teaching and play as sitting on a continuum, their staff weighing up the extent of their involvement and fine-tuning how formal or informal, structured or unstructured, dependent or independent each learning experience should be to meet the needs of each child most effectively.

The leaders we visited recognised accurate assessment of what a child could do as being at the heart of any decision regarding their learning. Many invested significant time and energy in checking that their initial thoughts about children's skills and abilities were correct, discussing and agreeing their judgements with colleagues, including those from other settings, to ensure a common view.

We found too few disadvantaged two-year-olds accessing early education to secure a better future. The schools we visited were only just recognising the long-term benefits to a child of admitting them at a younger age. Many took as few as four two-year-olds at a time, only just scraping the surface of those needing most support in their community. If more schools do not realise their role in addressing the needs of the most disadvantaged, the work already underway is at risk of a false start.

A large number of the providers we visited shared a site with other forms of early years provision. We found the most successful went beyond simply occupying the same buildings and formed powerful, professional networks to collaborate with a wider range of colleagues. These networks were increasingly seen as 'the hub' within their community; beacons of early years excellence that were recognised for the quality and impact of their advice, guidance and training beyond their own gates.

While long-held beliefs about teaching and play have proven difficult to shift, the danger of allowing them to continue is all too real. If those in the early years sector continue to see teaching and play as separate, disconnected endeavours our future generations will continue to fall at the first hurdle.

Key findings

- **Leaders did not think of teaching and play as separate endeavours.** In every playful encounter we observed, adults, consciously or otherwise, were teaching. They were making important decisions about the resources they used and the questions they asked. They thought carefully about their physical

behaviours, the language they used and the environments they created. These constant, everyday decisions were recognised as teaching.

- **We found no one way of approaching teaching and play.** The views of the providers we visited were deeply rooted in their own personal beliefs about how young children learn. The common factor across all of the different approaches observed was the role, influence and interactions of the adult.
- **Teaching incorporates all of the ways that adults help young children to learn.** Those we visited found it unhelpful to think of their work as either teacher-led or child-initiated. They saw the interplay between adults and children as a continuum, with the adults making constant decisions about the level of formality, structure and dependence that would promote the best possible learning.
- **The prioritisation of speech, language and communication was the cornerstone of leaders' work with disadvantaged children, especially funded two-year-olds.** Leaders knew that all areas of learning were important but gave more attention to some, especially when ensuring that disadvantaged children received the best possible start to their education.
- **Where we found disadvantaged two-year-olds making rapid progress, they spent a higher proportion of their day interacting with adults than their better-off peers.** Most providers we visited recognised disadvantaged two-year-olds to be quiet observers of their surroundings, hesitant to interact and engage with new experiences. We observed up to 100% of a disadvantaged two-year-olds' time being spent with adults, with the staff working alongside children to teach them how to play and engage with the people and world around them.
- **Disadvantaged two-year-olds learned best when they played alongside older early years children.** Those schools and settings that allowed two-year-olds to learn and play alongside three-, four- and five-year-olds noticed a quicker rate of development for all children. Two-year-olds looked up to the older children as role models. The older children, in turn, reinforced and developed their own skills by explaining what they were doing and helping their younger friends.
- **Disadvantaged two-year-olds made the strongest progress when they continued their learning as three-year-olds in the same setting.** We found that children who had benefited from funded early education as two-year-olds in the same setting showed greater social and emotional development. Familiarity with adults, the physical environment and the routines and expectations of the setting enabled a more successful start at the age of three.
- **We found approaches to early reading to be viewed as the most formal approach to learning.** All schools and settings we visited ensured dedicated time each day to teaching communication, language and literacy. We saw that short, sharply focused teaching sessions, together with frequent opportunity to apply learning across all other activities, allowed the rapid development of literacy skills.

- **We found that many leaders had prioritised mathematics for improvement to ensure that learning experiences were challenging children to reach their full potential.** We noted that adults' subject knowledge in mathematics was not as strong as other areas of learning. Confidence to teach mathematics was highest in Reception classes, linked to the level of qualification and training of staff, and lowest among childminders and those who taught two-year-olds.
- **Accurate assessment of children's starting points was based on constant reflection about what was deemed typical for each child given their chronological age in months.** Where we observed this to be most effective, staff entered into frequent discussion, within and between providers, to check and agree their judgements. This included the frequent sharing of information between parents, other pre-school settings and health visitors.
- **Collaboration between early years providers was key to securing a higher quality of teaching and play.** We found that where schools and settings shared a site, were directly managed by one overarching leader or had entered into a professional network with others in the locality, expertise was shared effectively to allow all early years professionals to learn from the best. Many had become early years hubs for their area, championing the importance of early education and raising the quality of learning and development.

Background

Between 3 December 2014 and 13 February 2015, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) conducted survey visits to 49 settings across a range of early years providers. In total, HMI visited 21 schools and 28 pre-schools, children's centres and childminders. All providers visited were in the 40% most deprived areas.[5] Overall, 27 of the providers in our survey offered funded provision for two-year-olds: nine schools, 15 pre-school settings and three childminders.

All settings had been inspected under the most recent iteration of the relevant inspection framework and had been judged as good or outstanding. The schools were chosen because they successfully ensured that a high proportion of children secured a good level of development[6] by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage and that this early success was maintained as pupils moved through the school.

[5] Deprived areas are the 40% of lower super output areas with the lowest rank in the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index 2007; http://data.gov.uk/dataset/income-deprivation-affecting-children-index.

[6] A child achieves a good level of development, as defined by the government, if he or she meets the expected level in the early learning goals in the prime areas of learning (personal, social and emotional development, physical development and communication and language) and the specific areas of literacy and mathematics.

How do the most successful providers view teaching and play?

1. Early education is about every aspect of a child's development. It is about more than imparting knowledge. It is about providing a wide range of experiences and opportunities so that every area of development receives attention. Essential physiological routines, such as being able to recognise and go to the toilet, the social and emotional skills needed to form relationships and adapt to new experiences, the building of a receptive and expressive vocabulary to understand and communicate effectively, as well as the characteristics of learning, such as 'having a go' or persevering when faced with a tricky task, are all of prime importance.

2. The significance of play in allowing children to learn and develop across such a broad range of developmental areas has long been understood. Its fundamental value is recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[7] and the statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage.

3. Play provides the natural, imaginative and motivating contexts for children to learn about themselves, one another and the world around them. A single moment of sustained play can afford children many developmental experiences at once, covering multiple areas of learning[8] and reinforcing the characteristics of effective learning.[9] When learning for our very youngest children looks so different to elsewhere in the education system, a fixed, traditional view of teaching will not suffice.

> One setting provided children with the opportunity to become builders and challenged them to make a brick wall to stop the Big Bad Wolf from taking their toys. This playful activity broadened so many important areas of learning. Children were developing socially by cooperating with their peers, working alongside each other to share equipment. They rehearsed important language and communication skills when asking each other for specific equipment or offering suggestions about what to try when initial attempts did not work. They strengthened important physical skills by loading and unloading the wheelbarrow. They reinforced early counting and one-to-one correspondence when making decisions about how many trowels and bricks they needed. They gained understanding about the world and materials around them when they added water to their sand and soil to make the bricks stick together. Importantly, children enjoyed this experience and, unbeknown to them, they were learning.

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[7] *United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child*, UNICEF; http://www.unicef.org/crc/.
[8] The seven areas of learning within the Early Years Foundation Stage are: personal, social and emotional development; physical development; communication and language; literacy; mathematics; understanding the world; and expressive arts and design.
[9] The characteristics of effective teaching and learning are set out in the early years statutory framework as: playing and exploring; active learning; and creating and thinking critically.

4. Every opportunity to play allows children to learn and develop in this way. From banging saucepans together on the kitchen floor, to pretending to be aeroplanes by imitating engine noises, children's play has a purpose. Maximising these opportunities so that they are as powerful an experience as possible involves teaching children how to play and teaching children through their play.

5. The leaders and staff we spoke to during our visits were passionate about the importance of play *and* the need to teach. All were clear in their belief that children should have exploratory, hands-on experiences through play so that they would develop into well-rounded individuals.

6. Leaders' views about teaching, and particularly what constitutes good practice in the role of the adult, were less consistent. The views of teaching we gathered during our visits were deeply rooted in the personal beliefs and philosophies of the individual leaders and staff we met. We found that staff in the large majority of settings we visited were confident to use the overarching term 'teaching' to explain their many and varied approaches to learning and play.

> 'Teaching is in every activity we provide. It is the summation of all that we do. There are no activities that occur in the setting which we do not consider to be opportunities for teaching. While we do not always know where these opportunities will present themselves, it is the skill of the adults that enable them to readily recognise the "teachable moments" when they arise and respond to them appropriately.
>
> 'However, it is just as important to know when intervening would hinder or stifle children's learning. Knowing how or when to teach is about knowing the child very well and being aware that important learning can be taking place without you there and without you directing what children are doing.'

7. Many of the distinctions leaders made about the interrelated nature of teaching and play depended on how they interpreted key definitions from the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage framework.[10] Around one third of the providers we visited used the terms 'adult-led' and 'child-initiated' as alternatives to the words 'teaching' and 'play', respectively.

> 'We believe teaching is about adult-led activities, where the adult has a pre-defined purpose in mind, they know what they want the children to learn and have selected the specific individual or group who will benefit most. The adult decides everything; the most productive environment to

[10] *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage*, Department for Education, July 2014; www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2.

work in and the range of materials they want children to use so that the activity addresses a specific gap in learning.

'In contrast, child-initiated activity is rooted in play. Children choose where, when and what they want to do; it lasts as long as the activity interests and engages them. Children are free to select the resources and materials they want to use; whether they want to work on their own or with friends; and whether they want to do so inside or outdoors. There is no predetermined outcome in mind. Children are free to engage with the materials provided or those they access themselves from elsewhere in the setting, in any way they wish. While we might think they will build a car with a collection of old, cardboard boxes, if they decide to stack them up as a tower or build a wall then that is fine. It is about the process of play rather than the end product.'

8. During our visits, we found reluctance to use the word 'teaching' was mostly among leaders and staff in pre-school settings, who often viewed teaching as a very formal approach to learning that involved adults passing knowledge down to children through their focused direction of activities. They considered teaching to be the domain of schools and those who had qualified teacher status. As such, it held less relevance to the vast majority of professionals without qualified teacher status in pre-school settings.

'I prefer to use the term "practitioner" because I am not a teacher. I do not have qualified teacher status. My role is to ensure the very best conditions for children to learn, that the resources they can access are relevant and allow a degree of choice and that the environments they inhabit allow their learning to flourish. I do not teach because teaching is about the transmission of knowledge and, while children learn new things when I am with them, it is not because I am providing them with the facts to remember but because I am affording them the experiences that allow them to learn for themselves.'

9. The schools we visited, or those pre-schools and children's centres that were governed or overseen by schools, held a much more fluid view of teaching that did not depend on a specific job title or qualification.

'Everyone is an educator. Children, parents, grandparents and other professionals all have something they can contribute (teach) in any scenario. In terms of staff, I consider all of the adults I employ to be teachers, regardless of their role, because everybody I employ is here to intervene and make a difference. Those who work in the children's centre are teaching parents about how to better support their child. The speech and language therapists we employ are teaching children to communicate more effectively and, in turn, are teaching other staff about how they can help reinforce this learning. Everybody is in the business of teaching here, regardless of qualification, but it looks different depending on the role they play.'

A teaching and learning continuum: the role of the adult

10. Ofsted does not have a preferred style or approach to teaching or play. Those working in schools and settings, rather than inspectors, are best placed to make the important decisions about how children learn. However, Ofsted does define the elements of early years practice that make up teaching so that there is a common ground and degree of transparency when making judgements about the quality of teaching.[11]

> 'Teaching should not be taken to imply a 'top down' or formal way of working. It is a broad term which covers the many different ways in which adults help young children learn. It includes their interactions with children during planned and child-initiated play and activities: communicating and modelling language, showing, explaining, demonstrating, exploring ideas, encouraging, questioning, recalling, providing a narrative for what they are doing, facilitating and setting challenges. It takes account of the equipment they provide and the attention to the physical environment as well as the structure and routines of the day that establish expectations. Integral to teaching is how practitioners assess what children know, understand and can do as well as take account of their interests and dispositions to learning (characteristics of effective learning), and use this information to plan children's next steps in learning and monitor their progress.'

11. Virtually all of the settings we visited were aware of the Ofsted definition of teaching in the inspection handbook. They were pleased to see, from the very first line, that there was no expectation for teaching to conform to a 'one-size-fits-all' mentality. Of those who had not seen the definition before, most were from maintained schools and were therefore unfamiliar with the registered early years inspection framework. When the definition was shared, all were happy that it encompassed the many different ways in which they worked.

12. Across all of our visits, we observed many skilled and experienced professionals promoting successful learning and enabling all children to reach their full potential. In doing so, they all demonstrated the facets of early years teaching explicit within the Ofsted definition, bringing them to life in range of different contexts.

> **Communicating and modelling language**
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> In a number of schools and settings, we observed every interaction as an opportunity to develop children's speech, language and vocabulary. At a basic level, adults in one school ensured that, when speaking one-to-one or in small groups, they positioned themselves at child height and

[11] *Early years inspection handbook*, Ofsted, June 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015.

encouraged children's speech by creating opportunities for them to share their stories, ideas and feelings with one another. A simple, 'have you told Jack about that?' or 'can you tell Ellie what Joseph has just said about that?' was all that was needed to generate new discussions between the children themselves. This allowed some to develop their listening and attention and others the opportunity to rehearse their words. One school policy was for staff to 'never dodge a good word'. Consequently, when searching for fairy tale objects in the outdoor area, adults encouraged children to use more adventurous vocabulary, such as 'crown' and 'tiara', rather than 'hat' or 'band'.

Showing, explaining, demonstrating, exploring ideas, facilitating, encouraging, questioning, recalling and providing a narrative for what they (children) are doing

A mathematics activity observed at a pre-school nursery relied on the adult's expert use of these skills to further children's understanding of number and measures. Children were set the challenge of building the tallest tower out of foam builder's bricks. The adult showed children how to stack the bricks carefully so the tower would not fall down. He constantly reminded them throughout their task by reflecting out loud that, 'this one doesn't look very steady'. He subtly questioned children, 'how many more do you think we need?' to encourage prediction and counting and maintained children's engagement by encouraging them to persevere, 'I think we can make this much higher'. All the while, the adult skilfully narrated children's actions – 'Ahmed is looking for a brick that is flat on the bottom' – making key learning overt.

Setting challenges

We observed children during all of our visits who were engaged in activities that centred on rising to a challenge and/or solving a problem. These open-ended tasks, such as figuring out how to transport sand from one area of the yard to another using buckets and pulleys, or finding multiple ways to make ice creams that were 10 cubes high, enabled children to formulate solutions, test them out and learn from their mistakes. It taught them that making mistakes helped them to find the right solution on subsequent attempts and that there was often more than one way of completing the task. Setting challenges appeals to children's enquiring and inquisitive minds and allows them to develop all of the characteristics of effective learning.

The equipment provided

In one pre-school, a group of children had an interest in construction. Staff increased the resources available to extend children's thinking further. They transformed an area of the classroom into a construction zone with a range of wooden blocks, toolkits, high visibility jackets, hard hats, warning signs, reference books and stories linked to building. Another pre-school setting made a planetarium in their tree house using papier-mâché planes and stars and glow-in-the-dark stickers for planets. Staff used torches and lanterns to make the stars glow. Children enjoyed exploring the sky with their light beams and sang 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star'.

Attention to the physical environment[12]

One headteacher described the learning environment as 'the best teaching tool we have. It allows us to provide children with direct access to resources and experiences, both real and imaginary, that they may not otherwise receive at home. The constant changes made to the environment allow children to solve problems, interact with each other and develop their imaginations.'

In this school, the environment made excellent use of space. For example, adults could set up small learning spaces for quiet, focused time, free from the distractions elsewhere in the setting, or encourage adventurous use of a large, shared space so that it replicated an everyday home or shop or allowed children to become firefighters, attending an emergency in their fire appliance. Providing children with choices within their environment, both real and imaginary, is crucial in order for them to make decisions.

Structure and routines of the day that establish expectations

One school we visited described their daily routines as the 'rhythms of the day'. Familiar systems for signing-in on arrival, such as moving a photograph of their face from a picture of a house to a picture of the school, and the use of picture cards alongside written labels to recognise their 'own space' for coats and shoes brought a familiarity and sense of calm to a potentially upsetting time of the day when parents would leave.

[12] Further details of good practice in using the indoor and outdoor environment as a powerful teaching tool can be found at Ofsted's good practice site: *Using the physical environment as a tool for teaching: Netherfield Primary School*, Ofsted, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/using-the-physical-environment-as-a-tool-for-teaching.

Routines throughout the rest of the day gave children continued confidence and security in their environment by establishing a framework to the day, such as snack time after a period of busy activity and the quiet ritual of a shared story before home.

13. The successful leaders we visited were well aware that many people's views of teaching and play saw them as being complete opposites. All knew of the very black and white extremes that portrayed teaching as a formal process that children endured and play as a free, unstructured activity that children chose to enter into of their own free will. While leaders accepted that both teaching and play could be represented in this way, they were passionate that their own practices went beyond such a simplistic view.

14. Leaders and staff used a number of different terms to describe an adult's interaction and involvement with children in the space between the extremes of formal teaching and unstructured play. Leaders and staff used various terms, including 'adult-modelled', 'adult-guided', 'child-focused' and 'shared play', to define the multiple ways in which the adult's role, and how much they interact with children, can shift during the course of an activity.

15. In essence, leaders were creating their own shared language to describe the range of approaches to teaching and play that they had adopted. At one end of the scale, these included the unstructured, informal and independent experiences for children to learn and at the other, the more structured, formal and adult-dependent opportunities for learning. An adult's decisions were therefore about the extent to which activities, resources or environments were structured or unstructured, formal or informal or dependent on or independent of them.

16. All of the schools and settings we visited were clear about the contributory factors that adults weighed up when making decisions about how they would teach. These were:

    - an accurate assessment of children's starting points
    - an understanding of each child's interests and fascinations
    - an appreciation of how each child learns best
    - the subject content that needed to be taught
    - the context in which learning should be introduced and developed
    - the child's age and stage of development.

17. The most skilled adults we saw during our visits made these decisions almost automatically. They combined a deep understanding of each child in their care with a thorough understanding of child development and an expert level of subject knowledge. They could identify quickly the exact, small steps to continue a child's learning journey.

One pre-school setting we visited had focused on improving the subject knowledge of staff in mathematics. Leaders had recognised that mathematical development was not as strong as other areas of learning and, importantly, related this to their own deficits rather than any failure or weakness of the children. By the end of the year, training and professional dialogue ensured a higher and more consistent level of subject knowledge among the adults in the setting. Staff knew the underlying concepts about numbers that children would need to understand before they could engage successfully with addition. For example, they knew that children would have to understand that the last counted object was the label for the size of the group and that objects could be counted in any order. As a result, planning for progression became more focused and children's learning became more successful.

18. All schools and around two-thirds of the pre-schools we visited described their most formal or structured approach to teaching to be the learning that focused on letters and the sounds they make (phonics). Leaders and staff in these settings had set up a daily programme of short, targeted teaching to enable the youngest children to secure the fundamental skills of speaking, listening and understanding and, when appropriate, the foundations of early reading. Adults pre-planned these short, sharp sessions with a specific goal in mind. During these times, children were dependent on the adults being directed to the correct space in the learning environment and to the right resources to use. Adults had a specific outcome in mind and supported children to achieve this in the time they had available.

One school employed an early reading specialist to secure the important communication, language and literacy skills they had identified as a significant weakness among children. For two-year-olds, these sessions were brief but repeated often during the week. They involved:

- playing memory games, to develop the prerequisite short-term memory needed when learning to read
- singing well-known songs to develop a familiarity with rhythm and rhyme
- using interesting and colourful pictures to support children's vocabulary development and ability to create and maintain a narrative
- listening to and making sounds to support auditory discrimination and raise awareness of concepts such as loud and quiet, fast and slow.

Older children enjoyed formulating questions about the characters or actions in the illustrations of storybooks. They drew simple maps of the events in their favourite stories to help them remember the sequence of events and acquired at least three or four new sounds and representative letters each week. This systematic approach ensured that all children rapidly developed the step-by-step skills needed to read.

19. In contrast, time devoted to mathematical development was not as frequent or systematic, especially for two-, three- and four-year-olds. Leaders and staff were resolute that this area of learning was just as important as literacy. However, they believed there had been less of a spotlight on mathematics than for early reading, with fewer national initiatives and accountability measures from central government. Staff themselves felt less confident in approaching mathematics because their own confidence in the subject, often borne out from their own negative experiences at school, was lower than that for other areas of learning.

20. Nevertheless, the most successful leaders and staff we visited were successfully developing children's understanding of numbers and their appreciation of shape, space and measures. This was because they worked hard to ensure that it was given equal time to literacy across the week. Many had found interesting and engaging ways to incorporate mathematics into the activities, both formal and informal, that they offered to children.

> One school was adept at building mathematics into children's play. Inspectors observed children hunting for minibeasts and recording as tally marks, and then as numerals, the number of spiders, caterpillars and woodlice they could find in the undergrowth of the outdoor setting. Children who were making vegetable kebabs on the outdoor fire were questioned about the repeating patterns they had created on their skewers and the differences in length between each other's creations.[13] At another setting, staff encouraged two- and three-year-olds to ask for their toast during snack time by repeating the name of the shape it had been cut into. The role play area was defined as a lost property area where children could sort and group objects by size, shape and colour and assign a quantity in the shop's logbook once counted against the various pictures of clothing, such as shoes, jumpers, scarves and gloves. The early concepts of mathematics were evident across a range of play-based activities.

21. Of those we visited, pre-schools and childminders were much stronger at using the transition times of the day as additional opportunities for children to learn. The beginnings and ends of the day, snack and lunchtimes, as well as tidy-up time and the spare moments while getting ready for other activities, were all used to teach.

> One pre-school setting used the start of the day, while children were arriving, as an informal time to teach children about routines and expectations. Adults were quick when children first started at the setting to model where personal belongings should go, how coats and shoes

[13] A video with further details of good practice in integrating mathematical development into everyday activities and experiences can be found on Ofsted's YouTube channel: 'Langtry Children's Centre Nursery, Camden (London)', Ofsted, 2015; www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6EL5FpfJEk.

should be stored and the system for self-registering by moving a photograph from one board to another. As children grew accustomed to this routine, they too became teachers, showing the younger children how to approach the start of each day successfully and with increasing independence.

Similarly, at snack and lunchtimes, children were taught the etiquette of sitting at a table, increasingly using the correct cutlery, pouring their own drinks and beginning to help themselves to the food available. The adults modelled simple manners – a 'please', 'thank you' or 'pardon me' – to develop the social skills required when eating as a group. Easy discussions about the types of fruit or vegetables being eaten and the encouragement of more descriptive words and phrases to identify foods and express simple likes and dislikes promoted understanding of the world and better speech and language. These rich, informal opportunities were many and varied, incidental to the main purpose of eating lunch but highly valuable as a meaningful moment to teach.

Successful working with funded two-year-olds

22. Of the 49 providers we visited, 23 offered funded places for two-year-olds. Nearly three quarters of the disadvantaged two-year-olds in our sample attended pre-school provision over other types of settings. Only three out of 10 schools in our sample had begun to work with children under three and we found very few funded two-year-olds to be accessing childminder provision.

23. The leaders and managers we spoke to who did provide funded two-year-old provision shared a passion and commitment to supporting the most vulnerable in their community. In particular, the outstanding providers we visited saw it as their duty to reach out beyond the typical boundaries of a school. They wanted to make a difference to the wider early years system, casting their sphere of influence wider than their own provision for the benefit of the whole community.

> 'I see supporting the most disadvantaged children in this area as a moral imperative. As an outstanding school, we are seen as a centre of excellence and a hub for the local community. We are trusted and respected by parents and fellow professionals for the work that we do.
>
> 'It is important that we continue to reach out and do all that we can to tackle the early failure experienced by many children. When the opportunity to enrol two-year-olds came along, it became a natural extension of the work we were already doing with families and other pre-school settings.
>
> Mums, in particular, like the flexibility of the offer we have in place. They can be reluctant to leave their two-year-olds initially as they can become their crutch, their reason for not expanding their own horizons and

progressing in their own life. We normally start with just one or two half-days each week so that mum can still have the important time they need with their young ones. As both parent and child become more confident, this often extends to a full 15 hours of provision. It is amazing how independent both mothers and children can become.'

24. We observed disadvantaged two-year-olds making the greatest progress when they were able to learn and play alongside their older early years peers. Where providers operated as an integrated provision, we found the youngest children benefited from hearing more sophisticated language and seeing personal, social and emotional behaviours in action from their more confident three-, four- and five-year-old friends. This type of provision was also successful because it replicated the incidental learning children encountered at home when interacting and playing alongside their older siblings. We found this type of integrated working organisation to be more prevalent in schools than pre-schools, where children of different ages tended to remain in their own 'rooms' for much longer periods of the day.

> One school offered a mixture of separate and integrated experiences for its two-year-olds to maximise interaction among children of different ages but also ensure that the distinct needs of the age group were being met. Up to two thirds of the time each day was devoted to teaching and play with children of different ages. During this time, children were free to choose their own activities and work independently or alongside friends, using the separate spaces for two-, three- and four-year-olds interchangeably depending on what they were interested in pursuing.
>
> On the day of the visit, two-year-olds were observed to be enjoying role play, construction and gardening activities. Many of the youngest children were seen to mimic the actions and language of their older peers. One boy repeated single words that older children had used in full sentences, such as 'tall' or 'dirty', to describe their tower of blocks or the soil on their hands. Another girl was seen to shadow the actions of older girls by copying their pretend play in the fairy tale castle.
>
> The older children themselves also benefited. In explaining how to plant seeds in the flower bed, Nursery and Reception children were able to rehearse the correct sequence of actions out loud, show care and empathy for somebody else when they got muddy – 'Don't worry, it'll wash off' – and strengthen their procedural and positional language to ensure that others knew precisely what to do.

25. We found that two-year-old children made the greatest progress when they had access to continuous early education in the same setting. All providers noticed the benefits, as described previously, of intervening early with the most disadvantaged children and families. These benefits were seen to build as time went on, especially when unsettling transitions to a new provider were avoided.

'Our local authority sends two-year-old children from all over the locality because we are known for our expertise in working with the most challenging families and children with the most significant needs. About half of our two-year-olds remain with us when they turn three and we can definitely see the benefits of them staying with us for as long as possible.

'All of our two-year-olds make good progress but when they stay with us in Nursery we really notice what it is possible to achieve through early intervention. Some of our first two-year-olds are now in Reception class. They have been with us for two years already and the strong relationships and attachments to adults alongside the known rules, routines and expectations of our setting really help them to move forward rapidly in their learning.

'One of these children is already showing the signs of what is typical for his age at the beginning of the year. We are working hard to show that even from starting points that are significantly below what is typical for a two-year-old, we can help them exceed some of the early learning goals by the time they are five. This is the true impact of continuous provision over the first three years of a child's early education.'

26. We found two-year-olds spending up to four fifths of their time in activities that addressed their speech, language and communication and their personal, social and emotional development. Inspectors saw the greatest progress in those settings that had developed children's skills across a broad range of experiences, reinforcing children's understanding of the world around them. These settings also provided children with natural opportunities to apply what they had learned through meaningful interactions and encounters.

> One childminder organised most of their time around a series of everyday experiences and visits. A walk through the park, visiting the local shops or posting a letter all presented useful scenarios for children to interact socially with different people, use different types of language and vocabulary and learn about the simple ways in which the world works.[14]
>
> Even when back in the childminder's home, learning from the visits continued. Children wanted to write letters or wrap up their toys so they could go to the post office again. They wanted to draw pictures of the ducks they had fed in the park or role-play what they had seen in the greengrocers by counting pretend fruit and vegetables into paper bags.

27. In around two-thirds of the settings we visited, leaders and staff estimated that, for their under-threes, they allocated equal time between more structured,

[14] Further details of how childminders can engage young children in activities and experiences that develop their communication and language can be found at Ofsted's good practice site: *Teaching young children to develop their communication skills: Nicola Phillips, childminder*, Ofsted, July 2015; *www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-young-children-to-develop-their-communication-skills*.

adult-led activities and less formal child-initiated opportunities for play. Further discussion showed that this estimation of time was, in part, prompted by one section of the statutory EYFS framework:

> 'as children grow older, and as their development allows, it is expected that the balance [between adult-led and child-initiated experiences] will gradually shift towards more activities led by adults, to help children prepare for more formal learning, ready for Year 1.'

28. In reality, however, we observed children's experiences in the very best settings to be more adult-led than balanced, especially for disadvantaged two-year-olds. Occasions where adults intervened in play, engaged children in short, focused intervention work or directly led larger group activities were far more predominant across the day. Across the settings, we observed anything from 60% to 100% of a child's day being supported by adults.

> In one outstanding school, all of the experiences provided for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds involved adult direction and focus. Staff constantly played alongside the children, one to one and in pairs, to model the behaviours associated with play. Children's significant weaknesses in speech and language on entry necessitated frequent demonstration of how to interact and how to use the range of toys and equipment safely. Disadvantaged two-year-olds needed to be taught how to play and were seen observing the actions and behaviours of adults keenly before replicating what they had seen for themselves.

29. Leaders we spoke to during our visits knew that funded two-year-olds had yet to learn the mechanics of how to play by themselves and relied heavily on the adults working directly with them to structure their experiences and lead the learning. While excellent leaders and managers knew that this was what was best for their children at that age and stage of development, they worried that less confident staff or settings could take the wording of the statutory framework to imply that this approach was incorrect.

Parents as partners in teaching

30. The need for parents to be partners in their child's learning is well documented.[15] Parents and carers play a fundamental role in their children's early development through their style of parenting and the home environment they create. However, children from poor backgrounds are much less likely to experience a rich and rewarding home learning environment than children from better off backgrounds.

[15] *The early years: foundations for life, health and learning*, report of the independent review on the early years foundation stage, C Tickell, Department for Education, 2011; www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-early-years-foundations-for-life-health-and-learning-an-independent-report-on-the-early-years-foundation-stage-to-her-majestys-government.

31. Research evidence confirms that good partnership working and multi-agency arrangements are crucial prerequisites in improving engagement with disadvantaged families.[16] When parental engagement is increased, the confidence of adults grows and, in turn, they begin to acknowledge their fundamental role in teaching young children.

> One setting produced a booklet for parents, called 'Being the Teacher'. This resource gave parents a simple yet effective guide on how they could contribute to the teaching of their children and support the work of the school. All of the examples were rooted in everyday activities and, other than time and energy, were free. Ideas ranged from counting the stairs as children were being carried to bed to pointing out the shapes and colours of signs and symbols in the street.

32. All of the settings that were part of this survey acknowledged that a child's first teacher is their parents. They viewed effective parental engagement in the process of teaching as a cornerstone of their work. Evidence of the good practice with parents was seen mainly, but not exclusively, through the work of children's centres and those schools and pre-schools working in tandem with them.

> One children's centre described their open-door policy, encouraging parents to come in and out of the nursery regularly to take part in children's activities. Parents were invited to join their children on outings, including visits to different places of worship – a mosque, a church and a gurdwara – to help break down barriers, support community cohesion and help both adults and children gain a better understanding of their community.
>
> The centre ran training courses for parents who wanted to go further than taking part in centre-based activities and begin to develop their own skills at taking a lead. These 'keeping up with the children' sessions were held once a year and ran for a period of 12 weeks in the spring term. Initially just for parents and then with their own children joining in, sessions allowed adults to make board games, matching games or props for stories that they could use to promote children's learning at home. It also served as another social opportunity for parents to get out and meet new people.

33. We found excellent examples where individual leaders and managers were playing a vital role in supporting parents to understand how their children were developing. They explained what was deemed typical for different ages and encouraged adults to experience some of the activities for themselves to understand the setting's particular rationale.

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[16] H Grayson, *Rapid review of parental engagement and narrowing the gap in attainment for disadvantaged children*, National Foundation for Educational Research and Oxford University Press, 2013; www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/OUPP01?OUP01_home.cfm.

In one nursery setting, sessions were run for all parents, including fathers and those who spoke English as an additional language. 'Father's story week', where dads came into the setting and read stories with their children, and singing sessions, where parents joined the staff and children in singing songs in a range of home languages, showed all parents that they were valued and could make a difference to their children in very small but significant ways. In this nursery, some parents viewed teaching as formal learning and wanted their children to be able to hold a pen and write their name. During a workshop, held as part of a coffee morning in the adjacent community centre, nursery staff aimed to model how parents could extend learning at home. During this session, parents engaged in a range of physical activities that could be replicated at home to emphasise the importance of physical development as a prerequisite to writing. Parents described their amazement at the range of gross and fine motor skills that were needed before any child could pick up a pencil and put it to paper. Many remarked to each other that they saw the process of learning to write in a whole new light and wouldn't be forcing their children to write their name when they now knew the children weren't ready.

34. The opportunity to build relationships with parents at a very early stage in their child's development was seen as a huge advantage to all settings. Schools in particular found that the mutual trust and respect they fostered with families from when child was aged two allowed them to successfully work in partnership with the family for a potential of nine years.[17]

35. Leaders found that a proactive start with families, before their children had even arrived at the setting, was crucial in setting up shared expectations and outlining each other's responsibilities. One setting described this as an opportunity to enter into an informal, verbal contract. The most successful relationships with parents and families were said to develop from this agreement because both parties arrived with equal status. The professionals used non-patronising terms and the parents accepted the fact that support and guidance was being given in the best interests of their child.

One small, village school was clear that their work with parents was not about improving families' parenting skills. They believed that this would imply that they had judged the parents and found them to be falling short on certain measures. Rather than assuming people were making the wrong choices, leaders believed that financial constraints had led to people making fewer choices. To counteract this, the school organised various opportunities for parents to engage with their children in varied

[17] Further details of good practice in engaging parents, carers and families in children's learning and development can be found at Ofsted's good practice site:
Parents as partners in teaching: Trimdon Grange Infant and Nursery School, Ofsted, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/parents-as-partners-in-teaching.

environments and to 'be the teacher'. The school was providing the assistance to make family life more fulfilling and giving them the chance to provide their children with experiences that others took for granted.

Through this programme of educational outings, parents and children, alongside staff, visited a theatre, a farm, a local gym and swimming lessons. All of the families in the two-year-olds' class attended. This developed a strong bond between school staff, parents and children and created an informal network. It allowed the children to make friends before they started and reduced the social isolation felt by disadvantaged parents in a small, rural community.

36. In summary, the best settings worked as much with parents as they did with children. This was especially beneficial for the most vulnerable families who came to trust and respect the school through the steps they had taken to engage them in their child's learning in varied and non-threatening ways.

Assessment at the heart of successful teaching and play

37. An effective start with young children relies on getting to know their strengths and weaknesses, interests and fascinations, aptitudes and attitudes quickly. Only then can they be provided with the right balance of activities to suit their needs, interests and abilities. When children settle quickly and have access to teaching and learning experiences that challenge and engage them, they make rapid progress, regardless of their age and stage of development.

38. Completing an accurate assessment of children's capabilities is by no means easy. It relies on high quality skills of observation, an in-depth understanding of child development and excellent subject knowledge across a range of areas, to know the precise next steps to take. In the best settings we visited, these skills were almost automatic. Staff worked quickly to secure an accurate assessment of children's starting points from the moment they arrived. This was particularly important in areas of deprivation where children often arrived with significant learning and/or developmental delays.

39. Staff we spoke to were clear that assessments should be completed rapidly to maximise the use of time and ensure that individualised support was up and running and making a difference as quickly as possible. However, they demonstrated that it was necessary to make observations over a period of time rather than all in one day so that children could demonstrate their abilities in different contexts and with different people. Staff also needed time to liaise with parents and any previous or ongoing providers, such as childminders, to

ensure that all of the information available secured the best possible picture of the child. [18]

40. Parents were an integral part to the assessment process. They provided staff with vital information about the typicality of behaviours, actions and attitudes that staff had observed within the setting compared with what they knew was the norm from home.

> At one nursery, parents received a series of home visits before their child was due to start at the setting. Leaders viewed the settling in of children as a process and initiated their work with parents around six to eight weeks before a child's formal start date. During the first home visit, photographs are taken and information shared to start a 'This is me' book. This document starts by recording what children can do at home already but also charts the process of transition itself. As children begin to attend the nursery, initially for short periods of time, staff add to the booklet. The initial conversation with parents about children's interests are used to ensure that, on the very first visit, there are activities, toys or experiences that will appeal to children and help them adjust to a new environment. As the setting finds out children's needs, routines and starting points over this transition period, the information is used to plan the programme of teaching in order to help the child settle and form secure attachments with key workers and other adults.

41. The constant transfer of information between parents, other providers and staff was not only restricted to the initial assessments made on entry to the settings. In the schools and pre-schools we visited, liaison about a child's ongoing successes and achievements continued throughout their time in the early years. Staff were skilled at using the constantly evolving profile of a child to adapt and amend the experiences they offered to ensure maximum progress.

> One childminder regularly invited parents to place 'WOW moments' in their children's learning journals, reinforcing the importance of all experiences in the learning and development of children. Parents shared their children's learning through a home communication book. The childminder provided a set of stickers to be inserted in the book by the parents, logging key experiences and milestones, and these were added to assessment records to chart a child's progress. The records provided a focal point for daily discussion with the parents about how their child was doing. In this setting, parents particularly appreciated the regular texts and photographs they received from the childminder of what their children had been doing during the day.

[18] Further details of good practice in collaborating with colleagues and other professionals to support effective teaching and play can be found at Ofsted's good practice site: *Collaborating to support early years teaching and learning: Broomhall Nursery School and Children's Centre*, Ofsted, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/collaborating-to-support-early-years-teaching-and-learning.

42. We found settings to have a number of different terms to refer to the records and evidence they kept of children's learning. While a lot of providers were maintaining paper-based systems, through scrapbooks and journals, over half of the places we visited had begun to use electronic systems instead. These allowed instant collation of photographs, captions and comments against areas of learning and the characteristics of effective learning. Staff found that these systems had increased the time they spent teaching and interacting with children, rather than managing paper records, and provided more opportunities, in the moment, to record children's achievements.

43. The most effective records of children's achievements we viewed, whether electronic or paper-based, gave a very clear indication of the gains children were making in their learning. It was obvious to leaders, staff and parents when a specific gap in understanding or a particular barrier to learning had been overcome because the records gave a clear view of progress and progression of knowledge, skills and understanding. There was clear evidence that activities were being planned for a reason and that they were making a difference to the progress children were making.

44. We found that most settings we visited had established effective systems and processes to record, analyse and track children's outcomes. They could then plan to meet individual needs but also address any common gaps in learning for different groups of children or across specific areas of learning. The activities and experiences staff provided were noted by inspectors to balance the differing requirements of individual children, small groups and whole classes so that everyone made good or better progress.

> One pre-school setting recognised that a significant proportion of their children lived in high-rise flats. As such, they had limited space to play and reduced opportunities to explore outdoors. Initial assessments for this group of children identified that their physical development was particularly weak. The setting recognised this group of children as having a specific set of needs beyond those the others in the cohort needed and developed a programme of activities to address these. The setting's systems for logging and tracking their progress showed that they made rapid gains in this area so that, across the autumn term, they were already catching up quickly with their peers.

45. All settings valued the rich information that accurate assessment yielded. They constantly adapted their teaching so that certain areas of learning were given more prominence when needed. While all aspects of development were being covered, some were more important than others for different children. Leaders and staff were unafraid to give greater focus to some children at specific times to target persistent areas of weakness.

> In one children's centre nursery, staff had identified that, for some groups of children and in some areas of learning, achievement was not as high as for others. Boys in particular were noticed to be not doing as well in

literacy as the girls. In order to close this gap, the setting looked at what they provided to identify what needed to change and considered a new range of activities that would inspire boys. A boy's writing project was initiated, with boys given a range of shared drawing and mark making opportunities, outside and on a large scale, linked to topics that interested them. The mark making project supported boys to acquire and develop a range of skills including:

- working together in small groups
- giving meaning to the marks they make
- playing alongside others
- forming recognisable letters
- sharing and taking turns
- developing concentration
- using a range of mark making tools.

While leaders knew that the concerns about the gap between boys' and girls' achievement in writing were nothing new, one teacher recognised that, 'literacy for boys does not have to be an issue if you approach it in the right way'.[19]

Recognising typicality and securing the accuracy of assessment

46. Most settings we visited used a range of non-statutory guidance to support their assessments. The most common document we saw in use was 'Early years outcomes',[20] a non-statutory guide for practitioners and inspectors. This highlights typical development, across all areas of learning, for each of the broad age-bands of children that make up the early years sector.

47. In the best examples of assessment practice we observed, leaders ensured frequent opportunities for staff to meet, discuss and confirm what constituted typical development for children of different ages. This training opportunity reaffirmed for staff their understanding of child development and progression against which their future observations and evaluations would be made.

One nursery setting we visited, with funded two-year-old provision, timetabled monthly meetings for all staff to standardise their view of what was typical for different ages and stages of development. These meetings used a range of support material, both commercial and self-generated, to promote debate. Some schools would focus on a specific sub-area of learning; in others, they would hone in on a particular age-band. Inviting all staff, regardless of the age of children they usually worked with,

[19] Further details of good practice in identifying gaps in teaching and provision can be found at Ofsted's good practice site: *Improving boys' literacy skills: Greenfields Children's Centre*, Ofsted, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-boys-literacy-skills.
[20] *Early years outcomes* (DFE-00167-2013), Department for Education, 2013; www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-outcomes,

allowed a sense of progression to be developed and for everyone to appreciate what the entire learning journey looked like for a typical child. Staff found this process to be most valuable when it involved looking at video material, to imitate making an observation. Staff appreciated the opportunity to constantly practice and refine their skills in the safety of a training exercise.

48. We found this type of training worked best when staff followed up their learning quickly by making new assessments of the children in their care. Generally, leaders we met expected any training to follow through promptly into the everyday work of the setting so that there was immediate impact. Importantly, this quick application to 'real' children often led to a final moderation event to secure final judgements.

> One school we visited entered into moderation activities every half term to coincide with their summative assessment points. These sessions were attended by all members of school staff, from Nursery right up to the oldest children in Year 6. The headteacher also felt it was important for professionals from the attached children's centre to attend so that all adults understood a child's learning journey.

49. The close attention given by leaders to the checking of their assessments was extended in the most successful schools and settings we visited to ensure that the recording of children's progress over time was equally robust. Children's chronological age, in months, was at the core of these settings' systems so that leaders and staff could gauge whether the distance children had travelled was broadly typical, slower or faster than the amount of time that had passed.

> One school setting was quick to admit that their systems had not been robust in the past. The senior leadership team acknowledged that, previously, they had tried to use a system of average point scores in the early years to fit in with how achievement was calculated elsewhere in the school. They quickly realised that this did not work due to the broad age-bands in operation for young children. They no longer assumed that all children judged to be working in a particular age-band represented the same level of attainment. For example, the school's early years manager was quick to realise, and share with colleagues, that not all Nursery children were below what is typical for their age if they were assessed as working within the 22 to 36 months band. It would very much depend on their precise age, in months, at their point of entry and initial assessment.

50. We found evidence that, where schools and settings shared a site, were directly managed by one over-arching leader or had entered into a professional network with others in the locality, expertise was increasingly shared to allow all early years professionals to learn from the best. Many had become early years hubs for their area, championing the importance of early education and raising the quality of learning and development. This closer working partnership for the benefit of the local community had started with joint meetings between one or

two providers to support accurate assessment and quickly grow to involve shared training.

> One setting we visited had become the centre for early years excellence in their area. They offered training sessions to other providers and encouraged staff from different providers to meet. This initially began as an open forum to share examples of what had worked well and find solutions to common difficulties. As staff grew in confidence, this developed into observing each other's' practice to gain greater insight into strategies and approaches that worked. This group were leading the way in their area, working more closely for the benefit of early education in their community.

51. The schools and settings we visited found judging the typicality of children's development difficult, both at the time of entry and throughout their time in the early years. The best providers we visited worked together as a staff and with other providers in the locality, to strengthen their understanding of key child development indicators. Frequent discussion allowed all adults to focus their teaching more clearly on children's next steps and this led to more rapid progress for children.

Notes

Between 3 December 2014 and 13 February 2015, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) conducted good practice survey visits to 49 settings across a range of early years providers. In total, HMI visited 21 schools and 28 pre-schools, children's centres and childminders. All of the providers visited were in the 40% most deprived areas.[21] Overall, 27 of the providers in our survey offered funded provision for two-year-olds: nine schools, 15 pre-school settings and three childminders.

All settings had been inspected under the most recent iteration of the relevant inspection frameworks and had been judged as good or outstanding. The schools were chosen because they successfully ensured a high proportion of children secured a good level of development[22] by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage and that this early success was maintained as pupils moved through the school.

Within the sample, settings worked in a range of different contexts. For example, inspectors visited small rural schools, large inner city providers, schools where

[21] Deprived areas are the 40% of lower super output areas with the lowest rank in the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index 2007; http://data.gov.uk/dataset/income-deprivation-affecting-children-index.

[22] A child achieves a good level of development, as defined by the government, if he or she meets the expected level in the early learning goals in the prime areas of learning (personal, social and emotional development; physical development; and communication and language) and in the specific areas of literacy and mathematics.

governors managed private childcare provision and/or a children's centre onsite, as well as three childminders who belonged to the PACEY[23] network.

During the survey visits, HMI observed disadvantaged children's learning and development and looked at their assessment records and documents that tracked their individual achievements over time, such as learning journals or similar. In smaller pre-school settings and with childminders, HMI completed one case study. In larger pre-school settings, inspectors completed two case studies. In schools, inspectors completed up to three case studies: one of a disadvantaged three- or four-your old, one of a reception-aged child known to be eligible for free school meals and one of a funded two-year-old, where the setting had provision for this particular age group.

Inspectors spoke to leaders, managers and staff in all settings to get the views and perceptions of different adults towards teaching, learning and play. At every opportunity, inspectors encouraged providers to show how their views and beliefs were exemplified in their day-to-day practice.

Research publications feedback

We are interested in finding out how useful you have found this publication.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or are you just interested? We would welcome your views and ideas. Complete our survey here.

Further information

Ofsted publications

Unseen children: access and achievement 20 years on (130185), June 2013; www.gov.uk/government/publications/unseen-children-access-and-achievement-20-years-on

Early years inspection handbook, June 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015.

Learning together through play in the early years: St John Vianney Primary School Childcare, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/learning-together-through-play-in-the-early-years.

Teaching young children to develop their communication skills: Nicola Phillips, childminder, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-young-children-to-develop-their-communication-skills.

[23] Professional Association for Childcare and the Early Years (PACEY); http://www.pacey.org.uk/.

Supporting children's learning through teaching and play: childminder 403559, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-childrens-learning-through-teaching-and-play.

Collaborating to support early years teaching and learning: Broomhall Nursery School and Children's Centre, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/collaborating-to-support-early-years-teaching-and-learning.

Integrating provision for two-year-olds in school: Prior Weston Primary School and Children's Centre, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/integrating-provision-for-two-year-olds-in-school

Using the physical environment as a tool for teaching: Netherfield Primary School, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/using-the-physical-environment-as-a-tool-for-teaching.

Improving boys' literacy skills: Greenfields Children's Centre, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-boys-literacy-skills.

Parents as partners in teaching: Trimdon Grange Infant and Nursery School, Ofsted, July 2015; www.gov.uk/government/publications/parents-as-partners-in-teaching.

Ofsted videos

The videos below can be found at www.youtube.com/user/Ofstednews.

'A balancing act – teaching and play, no one way' – introduction
www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWf6oHE9YqY.

'A balancing act – working in partnership to meet the needs of every child'
Langtry Children's Centre Nursery, Camden
www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6EL5FpfJEk.

'A balancing act – continuity of learning in an integrated setting'
St John Vianney Primary School Childcare, Hartlepool
www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiXCJppA9Oo.

'A balancing act – a family-focused approach to teaching two-year-olds'
Trimdon Grange Infant and Nursery School, County Durham
www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCtg52EILQo.

Other Ofsted early years reports

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Annex A: Providers visited

Pre-school providers	**Local authority**
Abacus Pre-School @ Mangotsfield	South Gloucestershire
Broomhall Nursery School and Children's Centre*	Sheffield
Childminder*	Barking and Dagenham
Childminder	Newcastle upon Tyne
Childminder	Bradford
Childminder	Devon
Childminder*	Croydon
Childminder	Devon
Childminder	Lancashire
Childminder*	Portsmouth
Childminder	Liverpool
Green Hedges Day Nursery*	North Yorkshire
Greenfields Children Centre*	Ealing
Hounslow Day Nursery*	Hounslow
Langtry Nursery and Children's Centre*	Camden
Little Bundles of Murton*	County Durham
Littlewaves Community Nursery Windwhistle	North Somerset
Nesham Private Nursery*	Sunderland
Paint Pots Pre-School and Nursery*	Southampton
Park Families Sharps Copse Nursery*	Hampshire
Pippins @ Rosegrove Nursery Ltd*	Lancashire
Positive Steps	Windsor and Maidenhead
Redcliffe Early Excellence / Children's Centre*	Bristol City
St John Vianney Primary School Childcare*	Hartlepool
Stephens Children's Centre*	Southampton
Sunflowers Day Nursery*	North Yorkshire
Wellingtons for Langley Hall*	Slough
Young Friends Nursery School	Brighton and Hove
Schools	**Local authority**
Blaise Primary and Nursery School	Bristol
Christ the King Catholic Primary School	Reading

Clements Community Primary School	Suffolk
Essex Primary School	Newham
Featherby Infant and Nursery School	Medway
Handale Primary School* *Handale Under 3s*	Redcar and Cleveland
Harwich Community Primary School and Nursery	Essex
Hoblett's Manor Infant School	Hertfordshire
Lander Road Primary School* *Lander Road Pre-School Care*	Sefton
Livingstone Primary and Nursery School	Barnet
Medlock Primary School* *Medlock Primary School 2YO Class*	Manchester
Netherfield Primary School* *Netherfield Primary Pre-School*	Nottinghamshire
Prior Weston Primary School and Children's Centre* *Golden Lane Children's Centre*	Islington
Queen's Park Primary School	Brighton and Hove
Robin Hood Primary School	Kingston upon Thames
Roman Hill Primary School	Suffolk
St Gregory's Catholic Primary School* *St Gregory's Catholic Primary School 2YO Provision*	Liverpool
St Theresa's Catholic Primary and Nursery School	Harrow
Trimdon Grange Infant and Nursery School* *Trimdon Grange 2YO Class*	County Durham
Warrington Road Nursery School* *Warrington Road Bambini Day Care Centre*	Halton
Welbourne Primary School* *Welbourne Primary School*	Haringey

Settings highlighted in italics are the registered early years providers delivering funded early education for two-year-olds that are linked to the relevant school chosen for a visit.

* denotes schools and settings offering funded two-year-old provision.