

“We shouldn’t choose our next steps at random...”

Practitioners must ensure that they use the information garnered from their observations to inform their planning, says **Kathy Brodie**...

In my previous article I discussed a number of different types of observations, and how these can be used to tune in to your children. This really helps practitioners to understand children’s interests and developmental stages. This time I will be discussing how practitioners can transform their observations into relevant, interesting and developmentally appropriate next steps for the children.

Often the next steps planned for children only have tenuous links with the observations. There is rarely an explicit link as to why this would be a valuable next step, correlating to the observation, child development or the individual child. It is important that these links are made, so practitioners can support children effectively and understand the cyclical nature of observations, assessment and planning.

One way to do this is to consider four categories of next step that may result from observations and assessment. These can be a useful framework to help practitioners to choose suitable ‘next steps’ from their observations and assessments.

Category 1 – Child Development

This is probably the most straightforward of the next steps because it is well supported by the EYFS and other development programmes, such as Letters and Sounds (DCSF, 2008). Once the child’s current developmental stage has been determined from observations, the next step can be formed using the practitioner’s knowledge of child development, supported by the next steps in the EYFS. However, practitioners need to be aware that the steps may be too

large or too small for their own child. This will be especially true for children who have special educational needs or are gifted and talented.

Category 2 – Extending an interest

If a clear interest has been identified from the observations, this can be scaffolded and extended. This may be through further, similar activities such as extending an interest in fire engines into other transport vehicles or into people who help us. This is a good next step for a child who has a really strong interest, such as a schema. Activities that link to the child’s interest may be used to encourage children to access different areas of the curriculum. For example, the interest in fire engines could be extended to water play, using hoses outdoors or extended to numbers by introducing the idea of phoning 999.

Category 3 – Embed a learning point

It is important to embed learning that may only just be emerging. This could be as simple as re-reading a story or repeating activities again. Once the practitioner feels that the learning is embedded, the activity can be changed slightly to move the learning on. For example, your child may be investigating conservation of number using coins. Once embedded, you can extend this by including objects like teddies or cars. Or you may want to take the learning in a different direction, such as conservation of mass.

This form of next step may seem very small, but don’t be afraid to have activities that reinforce learning. If children are moved on too quickly, especially in mathematical development, the learning does not become embedded.



Reader offer

Kathy Brodie's book *Observation, Assessment and Planning* presents an integrated framework that puts the observation, assessment and planning cycle into practical terms, bringing it all together. The book focuses particularly on the critical links between each element of the cycle, underpinned with theory and illustrated throughout with practical examples and ideas. To get a 25% discount on the cost of purchasing your copy, visit www.mcgraw-hill.co.uk/openup/teachnursery or use the code **TEACHNURSERY** at checkout by 28/02/14.

Category 4 – Personal social and emotional development

Children who are secure and have a mastery disposition have a good base from which to learn. Developing children's personal, social and emotional skills allows many other sorts of learning to take place. This next step is most suited for whole group work, such as a key group, as well as individual children.

With all next steps, do consider 'more of the same'. Generally, children respond well to repetition and enjoy the security of knowing what is happening next. Skilled practitioners know when their child is ready to move on. It is important for practitioners to remember the children's learning is not a linear set of achievements, and that they learn across all areas simultaneously and at different rates. Practitioners should not just try to rush children on to the next level. A creative and experienced practitioner will be able to see the links between different areas of learning and development and how these can support each other. By way of example:

Observation Nathan was stamping his feet and watching the lights in his shoes flash. "Look, the lights come on when I do this."

Assessment Nathan is exploring cause and effect. He has realised his actions cause the lights in his shoes to flash. He has calculated how hard to stamp his feet to set the lights off.

Here are some suggested next steps, using the four categories above:



The **next step** might not be a specific activity – it could be access to part of the **environment** or **continuous** provision, such as open-ended resources for role-play



1 EYFS, Development Matters (Early Education, 2012) 30–50 months, Understanding the World, Technology 'Shows skill in making toys work by pressing parts or lifting flaps to achieve effects such as sound, movements or new images.'

The practitioner can 'Support and extend the skills children develop as they become familiar with simple equipment, such as twisting or turning a knob.' (p. 42) The next step may be looking at other simple equipment in the setting, such as the different types of door handles, opening the fridge door to see the light come on.

2 Nathan's interest may be the lights or the fact that they are flashing. This knowledge will come from knowing Nathan and understanding his interests. The next step in this case may be to extend his fascination with light and dark – for example, using the pop-up tent and taking him in with a torch to see the difference in dark and light.

3 Embed a learning point. This could be further cause and effect activities. For example, if you push the button on the CD player music comes on then goes off. What other buttons are there in the setting?

4 Enjoyment of own achievements. The next step may be to support Nathan's mastery disposition, showing his friends his flashing shoes at circle time to support his self-esteem at being able to do this. This may be appropriate if Nathan is generally shy or hesitant to speak at circle time.

It is vital to use your observations and assessments to inform the next steps and

planning for your children. This will support the children's learning, tune into their interests and make your role much more enjoyable.

MAKING CHOICES

Choosing the next steps should not be a random action: it should be considered, and the reasons why a choice has been made should be clear to the practitioner and preferably recorded somewhere – for example, on the planning or in the child's personal records. The choice of next step must be part of a bigger picture to support the child's holistic development.

Sometimes there is an unintentional bias by the practitioner because practitioners may view children's development through the lens of their own experience and knowledge. They may also avoid, or favour, some next steps for the same reason. For example, one particular area of learning and development that is often avoided is mathematical development – perhaps because practitioners are less secure in their own mathematical knowledge or because mathematical links are not as obvious as some of the other areas of learning and development. Practitioners should review their observations and assessments to ensure that all areas of the EYFS, including the characteristics of effective learning (Development Matters), have been covered. A critical friend could help by reviewing your next steps on a regular basis to ensure that appropriate weighting has been given to all areas of learning and development.