

“Why are the trees empty?”

Supporting young children’s developing thinking skills will open up lifelong learning opportunities, says **Pamela May...**

The question that forms the title of this article was posed to me by a curious three-year-old as we walked together through the orchard behind my house one winter’s afternoon. Brainteasers such as these are often asked by very young children, and all of us will have our own memories of similar delightful and often original and unexpected examples of childhood curiosity. Although we may smile inwardly at the way in which these questions are phrased, we answer them with all the clarity and honesty that we can muster, as we recognise their importance to the child’s developing ability to notice, to understand and to reason. Their ability to notice what happens in the world around them is a key element in the development of the good thinking skills that they will need to become successful learners. Every scientist, designer, writer, cook or crafts person needs to be able to notice small changes in what they see in the course of their work, and to be able to respond in thoughtful and measured ways to what they see. It is then possible to make reasoned judgements and achieve understanding as a result of what they have noticed.

This process of cultivating a thoughtful approach to life begins in the cradle with loving and respectful exchanges between carer and baby. The baby who experiences being involved in conversations, and being sung and read to by adults who enjoy her company, knows from early on that her feelings and ideas are important to those she

What is needed is a recognition by **practitioners** that these **skills** are vital for **children** to acquire in order for them to make the most of their learning **opportunities**



loves. From this starting point grows the understanding that the world works to patterns that she can understand and play an active part in shaping. By being interdependent with trustful adults, the very young child will move towards becoming independent and gaining the self-confidence to make suggestions, express ideas and make choices that she knows will be valued.

Children who experience being loved, cherished and responded to will flourish in all areas of their development. For example, in emotional development, the confident learner will begin to empathise with others and to understand how others may be feeling. In their cognitive development they will begin playing with the concept of symbolism, realising that one thing can represent something else in a game. This opens up a whole new world of possibilities as the idea of 'what if?', rather than 'what is', is played out in imaginative role play games.

Positive habits

The type of experiences that a child needs to have access to in order to encourage the fostering of successful learning habits are enshrined within the EYFS. It states that a number of characteristics are highlighted, describing factors arising within the child which play a central role in learning, and in becoming an effective learner. Ways of learning that support these characteristics have been grouped within the EYFS commitments and are:

- playing and exploring;
- active learning;
- creating and thinking critically.



So crucial are these characteristics that they now form a part of the Early Years Profile, and practitioners need to consider and comment on how their key children are progressing in the development of these aspects. Again, as the EYFS rightly says, these learning characteristics are about processes rather than outcomes. The suggestion is that practitioners will notice how children are learning by noticing the attitudes they see. Observable attitudes in children that would suggest they are developing these characteristics might be:

- concentration;
- persistence;
- questioning;
- enthusiasm for new learning;
- the ability to seek help;
- using their initiative to solve problems;
- being prepared to have a go;
- coping with failure;
- applying what they know to new situations;
- enjoying success;
- being able to plan and review activities.

Practitioners can support children's developing positive habits of learning in two major ways. Firstly, the learning environment needs to have interesting and challenging elements in it that will unlock children's natural propensity to be curious and to explore. The setting that will unlock children's characteristics of effective learning will be a place where, although routines and carers remain constant, sometimes surprising things happen, sometimes things go wrong or there are unexpected outcomes. In the outside area, for example, there will be a balance between safety and challenge, with nooks and crannies to be explored, holes to be dug, something to climb and somewhere to hide. Children will be encouraged to choose their own activities, to be either inside or outside, combine different pieces of equipment and use them for their own purposes.

Responsive adults will be on hand to engage in the sustained, shared thinking that might lead in many different directions, all unknown at the outset but all rich with possibilities. What has been learned before can be applied to new situations, and children can begin to build on earlier experiences to plan and predict their next course of action.

This type of learning environment is an exciting place to be for both adults and children. The emphasis here is not so much on the body of knowledge being learned as the processes of positive learning styles that are being encouraged. Happily, though, in my experience this is not an either/or situation. For where children are realistically challenged and confidently engaged in their learning, their knowledge base increases

significantly as they discover important things that must be practised, experimented with, recorded or recalled in a range of ways.

Thinking skills

The second role for the adult in supporting the development of critical thinking is the teaching of skills that children will need to use when they are tackling something new and need a high level of cognitive functioning to succeed. Think, for example, of the four-year-old boy at the creative area of his setting who wants to make a car from the boxes, paper, glue, scissors and stapler that are available. What skills does he need? He will need a good memory of what a car looks like. He will need to be able to match the picture in his head to what might be possible from the equipment he can see that he has at his disposal. He will need, probably, all of the characteristics of effective learning listed above as well as a key person who knows him well and can sensitively share in this project in a supportive role.

Skills, such as the development of memory, the ability to predict and the ability to plan and to persist can all be taught through games, rhymes and stories, routines and conversations with young children. What is needed is a recognition by practitioners that these skills are vital for children to acquire in order for them to make the most of their learning opportunities. They are, incidentally, not just useful skills for a child to possess, but, once securely available for everyday use, become the habits of mind that lead to creativity and to what is often known as a positive disposition to learning.

Children who have gained these high-order thinking skills are sometimes referred to as "mastery" learners; that is, children who see complex new learning as a realistic challenge and an achievable goal. They believe that they are intrinsically able, by effort, to experience success and they steadily grow in confidence and competence. It is within the early years setting that such habits of mind can be introduced and nurtured. Early years practitioners with a sound understanding of child development are thus perfectly placed to instil a lifelong love of learning in the children in their care.



FIND OUT MORE

Pamela May is the author of *The Thinking Child: Laying the foundations of understanding and competence*, published

by Routledge. Priced at £16.99, it is available now from routledge.com/9780415521918