

# Exploration & play

**Sue Gascoyne** takes a look at the revised EYFS framework and suggests ways in which the new learning goals might be approached by practitioners...

**T**he revised EYFS is public, set to come into force in September 2012, following consultation. While there is much to celebrate, it undoubtedly marks a sea-change in approach with its emphasis upon 'school readiness'. Thankfully for the youngest children, a play-based approach prevails. Practitioners will welcome the streamlining of the learning goals from 69 to 17 and associated reduction in paperwork. The importance of close working and communication with parents is also recognised in shaping children's life chances.

The six areas of learning and development are to be replaced by three prime areas: personal, social and emotional development; communication and language; and physical development. This recognises their crucial role as lynch-pins in the development of 'well-rounded' children and, ultimately, accessing life's opportunities. For many practitioners the downplaying of literacy and numeracy will be welcomed. The fact that 'Practitioners working with the youngest children are expected to focus strongly on the three prime areas' (Revised EYFS, July 2011) probably comes as music to their ears, but what of older children? Literacy, mathematics, understanding the world and expressive arts now fall into four specific areas of learning and development, and for 3–5-year-olds the balance will shift towards 'a more equal focus on all seven areas of learning' (Revised EYFS, July 2011).

The review recognises that we all learn in different ways and that 'playing and exploring', 'active learning' and 'creating and thinking critically' (three of the four 2008 learning and development commitments) are vital for effective teaching and learning, as well as having a strong synergy with sensory play. However, many will view the narrowing in focus to school rather than 'life readiness'; 'educational programmes' and 'teaching' rather than play; and number, shape and sums rather than problem-solving and reasoning, as retrograde. Observations of play reveal naturally occurring examples of pattern, shape, size and number. Take the three four-year-olds playing with sand and a treasure basket who made the links between a tiny flowerpot and



the big pots in the garden, or the child with SEN who showed his understanding of volume, space, cause, effect and number when he squeezed biodegradable packing 'peanuts' into a tin 'to fit some more in', then needed a strategy to remove the stuck-together clump, to count them!

## Room to explore

What, though, of the learning (and enjoyment) derived from less educationally obvious experiences, like a muddy puddle where full-bodied learning, problem-solving and reasoning can come to the fore? Will the revised EYFS provide greater opportunities for such open-ended exploration and play-based learning? The answer probably lies in the hands of practitioners and parents.



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**SUE GASCOYNE**

The revised EYFS recognises the importance of the first five years of a child's life. With the senses ultimately a gateway to all learning and development, the importance of exploration, active learning and creativity are apparent. A key challenge in engaging parents can be justifying the value of play, especially messy play. Deeply absorbing play provides real curricular outputs without the need for expensive specialist equipment. As such, sensory-rich play is perfect for engaging adults in quality interactions with children and fostering an understanding of the benefits of play.

## 1. Personal, social and emotional development

The best learning is relevant and rooted in

## findoutmore

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children's interests and existing knowledge, and few children could resist the urge to play with sand, water or mud! In fact open-ended resources like these, natural resources and the objects typically found in a treasure basket are perfect for fostering 'personal, social and emotional development'. This can be true for children across the ages, as in a positive environment there are no right or wrong ways of playing. Watch a child deeply engrossed in play and we gain an insight into their personality, interests and schemas (repeated patterns of behaviour). Sustained focus can be indicative of contented exploration, problem-solving and testing of ideas and theories – common occurrences in sensory-rich play. It can contribute to emotional wellbeing and self-awareness and give rise to exquisite moments of peer mentoring, where learning is extended – as was the case for a four-year-old whose friend suggested adding water to some sand in a wire eggcup to stop it falling out, and whose awe and wonder when they realised that it worked was clear to see.

## 2. Communication and language

The open-endedness of most sensory play is great for promoting 'communication and language'. Indeed, sensory-rich experiences give meaning to a whole host of words and plenty of opportunities for honing hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills. Without first-hand experience, concepts like 'soft' and 'hard' lack meaning – a bit like experiencing snow through someone else's description of it. Language responses can vary, with some babies and young children babbling as they explore as if commentating on their play while others play in silence, possibly because deeply engrossed. The open-endedness of the resources and element of surprise about what they will do can produce spontaneous writing and mark-making, like the children inspired by a



collection of unusual bottles who developed perfume and wine labels for their concoctions. A great example of meaningful writing, especially as it was instigated by the children themselves!

## 3. Physical development

Play with malleable or open-ended resources like sand, mud or treasure basket objects are great for developing fine and gross motor skills as well as strength. Take young babies sat absorbed playing with a treasure basket; as well as their magical exploration, they are developing their back, shoulder and arm muscles, building strength and coordination, and hardwiring their brains for learning. Unlike adults, children's play tends to be full-bodied, great for development as it increases connections in the brain. Like mark-making in dry or wet sand, jumping in muddy puddles, reaching high to climb a tree, painting with a finger or whole hand, all these actions take time or skill to master.

## Purposeful play

The revised EYFS states that 'learning and development should take place through planned, purposeful play'. Sensory play can deliver this and more. Within a positive environment, sensory-rich experiences move beyond curriculum boundaries – a pile of sand provides time for reflection and concentration; inspires communication and mark-making; sparks problem-solving and mathematical investigation; introduces the world and its properties; hones physical skills and mastery; increases creativity and imagination; but above all offers enrichment and fun. What's more it can even be spontaneous and without a purpose if that's your idea of play!

