

Cause *for* concern?

Educational psychologist **Julia Dunlop** offers advice on monitoring children's developmental progress and identifying additional needs...

All children develop at different rates. One infant might take his or her first steps at 10 months, whilst another won't let go of the steadying hand until eight months later – but both babies are 'average'. Some small children begin to combine two words (for example, asking for, 'more juice') by their second birthday, whilst others don't reach this point for another six months or so. This, again, is 'average' development.

In the same way, children can also have different developmental profiles. Some acquire skills at a similar rate across the board; others seem to make speedier progress in one area of development than another – perhaps quickly acquiring physical skills whilst language lags a little behind.

Identifying additional needs

One challenge for the early years practitioner is to decide at which point a child's different or uneven development should become a concern – a concern requiring action.

Some young children enter early years settings with well-documented additional needs and the long-established involvement of many agencies. This article, however, will focus on those children whose additional needs become apparent over time. The early years practitioner has a vital role to play in identifying these needs.

When early years practitioners are asked, "Think of the skills you teach young children. Do you use the same strategies with every child?" they, of course, say, "No." They might then go on to list the very natural ways in which they 'differentiate' a task for different

children. For example they may:

- Reduce a bigger task into simple steps – teaching one step at a time
- Simplify their language – using short, clear instructions and guidance
- Give a demonstration of what needs to be done
- Use pictures to help children see the sequence of actions they need to do
- Gently guide the child's hands – particularly on a physical task like cutting
- Try to minimise distractions when teaching something new – to maximise focus and concentration

In doing all these things, the early years practitioner is not just differentiating, but is carrying out assessment by teaching – carefully noticing the type and amount of prompts a child needs in order to be successful at the task. All of this fits in with the 'Graduated Response' to identifying and meeting special educational needs as outlined in the Revised SEN Code of Practice (2002).

The assessment of a child with possible additional needs should follow the same fundamental principles as any of the best assessment practices in any early years setting. Although intervention may provide something 'additional to' or 'different from' standard provision, the principles of assessment remain consistent for all children. Assessment should be:

- Manageable and practical
- Accurate and based on evidence – not assumptions and possible misinterpretations
- Useful – for planning intervention
- Seen as a continuous process



Play-based assessment

Most natural play situations present opportunities for early years practitioners to carry out 'play-based assessment'. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget saw young children as 'little scientists' – achieving learning as a by-product of exploring their surroundings. Although some aspects of Piaget's theories are now dated and even questionable, the notion of presenting children with a stimulating and creative environment is still current in early years practice.

Observing the extent to which an individual child actually does explore all the available activities, as well as the extent to which they learn from this exploration, can provide rich material for identifying learning needs. One child might flit from one activity to another, barely engaging with anything for longer than a couple of minutes. Another child might, quite passively, remain at the same activity for large chunks of time – but still not explore or learn very much. Both such children would legitimately raise initial concerns and warrant more detailed observation and assessment.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky emphasised the importance of the social context in which a young child's learning takes place. He proposed that each child has an actual level of development and a potential level



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– the potential level only achieved through social interaction, preferably with a supportive adult. This support was later described by Jerome Bruner, an American psychologist, as 'scaffolding'. Observing the extent to which an individual child needs this 'scaffolding' can be another indicator of learning need.

Areas of need

Where a setting finds it necessary to monitor an individual child particularly closely and provide targeted input in order for them to access the Early Years Foundation Stage, this is the same as saying that the child has Special Educational Needs.

The Revised SEN Code of Practice (2002) places all special educational needs under four headings or 'Areas of Need'. Examples of significant concerns under each heading are given below:

Cognition and learning

- Play skills are immature compared to others of the same age
- Slow to learn new skills
- Much repetition needed before skills are retained
- Can't generalise a skill from one situation to another

Communication and interaction

- Speech difficult to understand – even by parents
- Can't follow simple verbal instructions
- May be relatively silent
- May use little gesture
- Reluctant to interact

Behaviour, emotional and social development

- Doesn't recognise rules or boundaries – testing them
- Hurts other children
- May be very quiet and passive
- Can't persevere – soon gives up

Sensory and/or physical development

- May hold books very close to face
- Often bangs into things or trips

Look out for...

WHEN OBSERVING A CHILD IN A PLAY SITUATION IT'S USEFUL TO NOTE THE FOLLOWING:

1. Did he choose the activity independently?
2. How involved is he in the activity?
3. In what way does he react when another child joins the activity?
4. Does he collaborate in group play?
5. Does he take the lead, does he imitate or does he ignore?
6. How does he communicate – verbally and non-verbally?
7. With a novel toy or task does he use trial and error – or can he quickly work out what to do?
8. Does he easily become discouraged or frustrated?
9. Can he retain a new skill from one day to the next – or from one situation to the next?



- Has difficulty coordinating hands and feet
- Watches others to see what to do
- Concentrates on facial expressions and gestures

Promoting development

Assessment is not just about identifying additional needs; it is also about finding the most effective ways to promote children's development.

Key elements in promoting a child's development, whatever their level of need are found in the answers to the following questions:

- What can the child do now?
- What does the child need to be able to do next?
- What is the best way of teaching this child?

It is vital to remember that the identifying of a young child's additional needs is not about finding a label or a 'condition'. It's about looking at all aspects of their development and finding which approaches work best. It's also about working closely with parents.



find out more

Julia Dunlop was, for 12 years, a senior educational psychologist and early years specialist. In the next issue of TN, Julia will look at ways of translating the findings from assessment into practical intervention strategies.

Case Study:

Kyle (age 3 1/2 years)

Kyle, an only child, started attending a pre-school in September, 12 months before he was due to enter the Reception class of his local primary school. His mother reported no concerns regarding his development and no other agencies were involved.

1 Kyle's key-worker noted his strengths as follows:

- ✓ He has learned several daily routines, such as sitting on the carpet with the other children at story time
- ✓ In new situations he watches others to see what to do
- ✓ He is very skilled with construction toys
- ✓ He is creative and imaginative
- ✓ He can demonstrate to other children how some toys work

2 There were, however, the following concerns:

- ✗ His expressive language seemed immature compared to other children of the same age
- ✗ He'd begun to fall out with other children
- ✗ He often seemed to ignore instructions
- ✗ He began to have tantrums at tidy-up time

3 The setting SENCO, sought advice from the Area SENCO, who suggested the following.

- Be calm and consistent in your responses to Kyle's tantrums
- Give Kyle praise when he does follow instructions
- Think about giving Kyle (and other children) a five-minute warning before tidy-up time

3 Aspects of Kyle's behaviour improved, but concerns regarding his language skills continued. A consultation with the early years educational psychologist was requested. Her assessment showed the following:

- Kyle's non-verbal skills were well within the average range
- His expressive language skills were a little delayed
- His verbal comprehension was significantly delayed

4 The early years EP suggested that Kyle would benefit from speech and language therapy, and the setting, with Kyle's mum's agreement, made the referral. The EP also gave the following advice:

- Make sure you have Kyle's attention before speaking to him
- Simplify your language when giving Kyle an instruction
- Support the verbal information you give Kyle with picture clues
- Don't pressurise Kyle to speak more
- Comment on what Kyle is doing when he plays – rather than asking questions

Conclusion

Kyle was offered a course of speech and language therapy, and the therapist also came into the setting to give more detailed advice to the key-worker and other staff. Kyle became more confident at making his needs and feelings known verbally and no longer resorted to pushing children out of his way. Because instructions were now pitched at the right level for Kyle, he understood what he had been asked to do and cooperated more.