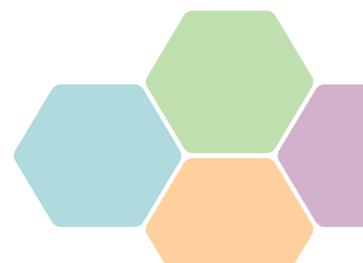


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Challenging practice to further improve learning, playing and interacting in the Early Years Foundation Stage



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Introduction

The target audience for this guidance is primarily Early Years Consultants (EYCs), but it is also relevant to School Improvement Partners (SIPs) and leaders/managers of Early Years settings (including headteachers, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) coordinators and leading practitioners).

The aim of this material is, through the support and challenge role of the EYC and the Early Years workforce, to:

- further raise the quality of learning and teaching in the EYFS in all settings
- improve provision
- develop practitioner understanding of pedagogy.

These aims will support EYCs in contributing to achieving the following goals:

- narrow the gap in outcomes for the most vulnerable children
- improve outcomes for all children.

The definition of an Early Years Consultant as given in the *Early Years Consultant's Handbook* (p. 37) is:

- a person employed by the LA to provide support and challenge to ensure effective implementation of the EYFS Framework, high standards of provision and continuous quality improvement by Early Years providers.

Since 2008 hundreds of EYCs have become established in LAs throughout the UK. The role has developed and expanded to take account of the changing face of Early Years provision and much has been achieved in improving quality and outcomes for children. In recognition of this the Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families, Dawn Primarolo, wrote to EYCs in February 2010 congratulating them on their achievements and the need to continue this journey of addressing quality improvement even more widely.

As the role has become embedded as an integral part of LA services, many EYCs have become more self-evaluative about their work and have posed questions such as:

- How can I challenge practice while maintaining a positive relationship with practitioners and settings?
- How can I challenge good settings to become outstanding?
- What are the successful strategies for improving settings where there is resistance to change?
- What do I need to do to further develop my consultancy skills?

This guidance aims to answer these and other questions. It focuses on developing pedagogy and how to improve outcomes through better learning, playing and interacting (learning and teaching). It provides information on the Early Years Consultant's role in providing effective setting-based continuing professional development (CPD) and is a supplement to the *Early Years Consultant's Handbook* and the *Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP)*.

A skilled and thoughtful adult who interacts with children in particular ways to enhance their learning is a crucial ingredient to children making good progress. Many Early Years practitioners shy away from using the word 'teaching' to describe their work with children, perhaps because of the perception that teaching implies a particular 'top-down' or formal way of working with children.

'In fact teaching is much broader and more subtle than that, and covers the many different ways in which adults help children to learn, including play-based learning and playful activity.' (From *Learning, Playing and Interacting* p. 4.) This guidance focuses on what effective support and challenge for learning and teaching in the EYFS looks like. In the EYFS, the term 'learning and teaching' is interchangeable with learning, playing and interacting as documented in the publication *Learning, Playing and Interacting: Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage*.

Section 1

The challenge role of Early Years Consultants

As 'catalysts for quality improvement' EYCs are at the forefront of:

- implementing quality improvement processes within both the LA and settings
- improving outcomes
- improving learning and teaching (learning, playing and interacting)
- sharing best practice across the whole sector
- working with graduate leaders / leaders / managers
- supporting practitioners' development of knowledge, skills and pedagogy
- building capacity at LA and setting level to sustain improvement
- championing parents' role
- providing targeted support to settings and setting leaders
- challenging practice and provision.

Challenge is crucial to improving the quality of learning, playing and interacting which children experience. Challenge needs to be effective and not appear to be confrontational or negative. It should be viewed in the context of ways of getting settings and practitioners to look at, reflect on, question and improve practice. The aim is to have a 'win-win' situation where the outcome is an improvement and stepped development in practice for the practitioner and setting, with better outcomes for children.

The question to consider is how can this be achieved? To do this there is a need to recognise:

- the barriers that may be blocking development
- that challenge is about asking the leading questions through purposeful feedback to enable practitioners and leaders/managers to reflect on their practice and identify the next steps for further development
- that providing challenge with support can be compared to an episode of sustained shared thinking between adults – and requires skills which are developed through practice
- a need for challenge to be based on evidence from differing sources such as observation, planning and records.

Pause for thought:

- What does support look like in relation to improving learning, playing and interacting in the EYFS?
- What does challenge look like in relation to improving learning, playing and interacting in the EYFS?

Challenge is successful when the person posing it:

- takes account of the context
- develops and maintains a professional relationship
- makes no assumptions
- is aware of how they are communicating (verbally and non-verbally) and how they are perceived by their audience

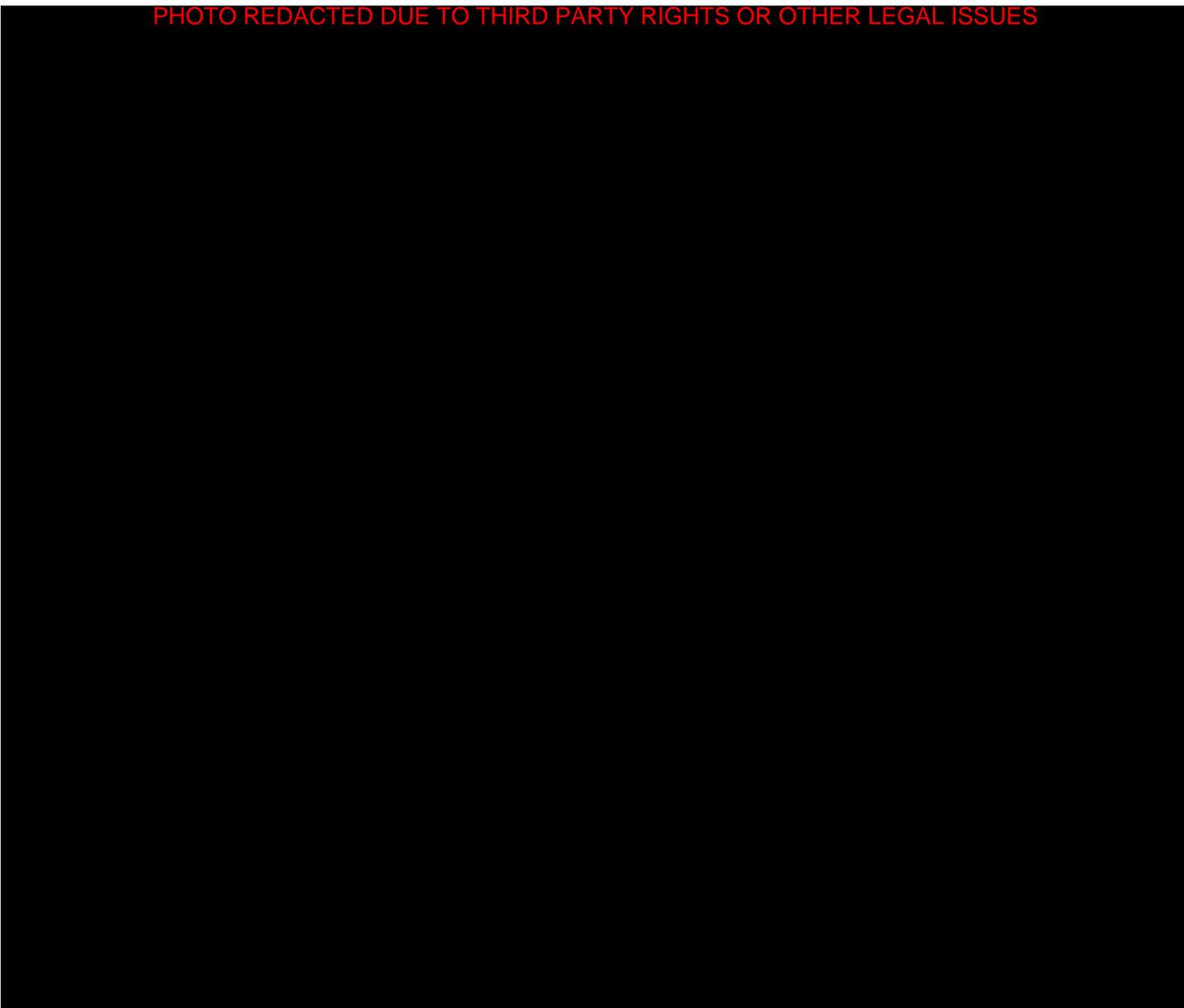
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- actively listens
- understands the practitioner's/leader's values and interests and appeals to these values when promoting change of practice
- avoids dominating the discussion
- anticipates reactions, considers what might provoke them and thinks about possible solutions
- asks open questions that prompt reflection about what has happened, why and what the impact has been
- avoids offering only one solution to an issue – but works in partnership with the audience to agree a way forward
- is able to draw on a range of evidence including research, data and documentation to support the discussion.

Find out more:

- *Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP) Supplement – Professional Development Meetings:*
 - Offering effective challenge as well as support
 - The analysis and use of data in the context of support and challenge.

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Section 2

Improving learning, playing and interacting

Early Years settings are most successful in improving the quality of learning, playing and interacting (learning and teaching) where leaders ensure all members of the setting community are committed to building the knowledge and skills to help children progress in their learning. A useful basis for this work centres on three key principles.

2.1 Key principles

- Teaching is improved when Early Years practitioners interpret their observations of children in the light of knowledge of child development and the EYFS to make accurate assessments of children's achievements – what they understand, know, can do and have the potential to achieve.
- Pedagogy is well matched to the needs of the children to move learning forward. In the Early Years, a variety of well-evidenced teaching approaches are utilised across a range of contexts including play, child-initiated and adult-led activity. (See *Learning, Playing and Interacting* pp. 10–13.)
- Effective professional learning, based on practice in the setting with practitioners and others working together, is essential to enable the setting to continue to move forward.

These principles will support Early Years Consultants and setting leaders to identify practical focused actions which will make a difference to the quality of learning, playing and interacting in the setting and support good progress for all children.



(Adapted from *Guidance for SIPs: Supporting and challenging improvement in learning and teaching*, p.4.)

Find out more:

Observation-based assessment

- *EYFS Principles into Practice* card 3.1 Observation, Assessment and Planning
- *Progress Matters: Reviewing and enhancing young children's development*

Well-evidenced teaching approaches

- *EYFS Practice Guidance*, and *Principles into Practice* cards 2.3 Supporting Learning, 3.2 Supporting Every Child, 4.1–4.4 Play and Exploration, Active Learning, Creativity and Critical Thinking, Areas of Learning and Development
- *Learning, Playing and Interacting: Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage*.

2.2 Learning, playing and interacting

With a supportive environment in place, the skilful interaction of practitioners is critical to support children's learning across all contexts – indoors and outdoors, play, child-initiated activity or playful adult-led activity, one-to-one or in small or larger groups, in planned activity or within routine or spontaneous events. **The quality of how practitioners engage with children is of central importance.**

The quality of how adults interact with children can be more subtle, difficult to assess, and harder to influence than more concrete aspects of provision such as the quality of an environment or resourcing. Yet this is the area in which successful challenge can have the greatest impact on children's learning.

In just the same way that a defined quality improvement framework supports challenge to other aspects of provision, an explicit statement of elements of effective Early Years pedagogy will be helpful in moving practice forward. It can raise awareness of elements of high-quality interactions, and provide a focus for reflection in terms of strengths and areas for development for individual practitioners and for the setting as a whole. For example, the list of key ways skilled and thoughtful practitioners support learning contained in *Learning, Playing and Interacting* (p. 27), which has been adapted below, could be used as prompts for both self-evaluation and as criteria to interpret observed sessions of adult-child interaction.

Skilled and thoughtful practitioners support learning by:

A Unique Child

- Seeking to know and understand each individual child and their learning and development
- Showing interest and celebrating with children their interests and achievements
- Supporting babies and children to develop a positive sense of their own identity and culture
- Recognising what children understand, know and can do, and supporting them in reaching their potential.

Positive Relationships

- Maintaining close, caring and respectful relationships
- Encouraging and supporting children to relate to others
- Supporting children to resolve their own conflicts through problem-solving
- Recognising that parents and practitioners have a lot to learn from each other
- Helping parents to understand more about learning, playing and interacting.

Enabling Environments

- Ensuring children have sustained time to develop child-initiated activities
- Arranging, resourcing, and making time for children to make free use of rich indoor and outdoor spaces
- Observing children as a natural part of all normal activity
- Interpreting children's actions and words to try to understand the child's thinking and learning
- Being sensitive to the child's thinking and learning when deciding when to interact and when to value the child's independent activity
- Joining in play and child-initiated activity following children's agendas

- Scaffolding children's learning through talk, discussing strategies and ideas, suggesting possibilities and modelling approaches
- Providing brief, well-planned focused learning opportunities in response to observed interests, learning and development.

Learning and Development

- Using daily events within the routine to provide worthwhile real-life experiences
- Varying experiences, using fresh, creative and playful approaches
- Providing first-hand experiences to explore and discover
- Recognising that, in their play, children use the experiences they have and extend them to build up ideas, concepts and skills
- Planning and resourcing a challenging environment where children's play can be supported and extended
- Directly teaching, through demonstrating or explaining
- Encouraging and supporting children to persevere through difficulties, to take risks, to ask questions and problem-solve
- Using the language of learning to focus children on themselves as learners
- Identifying and supporting next steps in learning.

Pause for thought:

How could you use this list as prompts to develop practitioners' pedagogy in:

- developing understanding?
- identifying strengths and areas for development?
- observing practice?
- supporting discussion?

Find out more:

- Broadhead, P., Howard, J. and Wood E. (2010) *Play and Learning in Early Childhood Settings – Theory and Practice*, Sage, London
- Edwards, S., and Brooker, E. (2010) (Eds) *Rethinking Play*, Open University Press, Maidenhead
- Fabian, H. and Mou, C. (2009) *Development & Learning for Very Young Children*, Sage, London
- Moyles, J., Adams, S. and Musgrove, A. (2002) *SPEEL: Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning*. Research Report 365, DfES, London
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2008) 'Understanding the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and progression in learning in early childhood', *Hong Kong Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 7 (2), 3–13
- Wood, E. and Attfield, J. (2005) *Play, Learning and the Early Childhood Curriculum*, Paul Chapman, London.

2.3 Conditions for learning

Practitioners influence children's learning by providing the most supportive contexts:

- understanding the individual development and needs of each child (*EYFS: A Unique Child*);
- maintaining warm, trusting relationships with children and partnership with parents (*EYFS: Positive Relationships*);
- developing challenging and stimulating indoor and outdoor environments (*EYFS: Enabling Environments*);
- ensuring children have opportunities to learn in playful, active, creative ways across all areas of learning (*EYFS: Learning and Development*).

Setting-based audits are useful to pinpoint and evidence strengths and areas for improvement in any of these contexts. Use of such quality improvement frameworks or scales adopted locally may provide a useful basis for discussion between Early Years Consultants and settings to plan for improvements in the conditions for learning through a focused improvement plan. As stated, when a supportive environment is in place conditions are ripe for developing high-quality learning, playing and interacting.

Find out more:

- *Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP)*
- Learning environment audit for Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy, pp. 46–49, Self-review audits, pp. 61–71
- *Social and Emotional Aspects of Development: Guidance for practitioners working in the Early Years Foundation Stage* Reflections on the emotionally enabling environment – audit tool, pp. 53–59
- *Every Child a Talker: Guidance for Early Language Lead Practitioners* Language provision in your setting – audit
- *Every Child a Talker: Guidance for Consultants* LA Training Audit
- *Communication, Language and Literacy Development Programme – Consultant file Audits*, Ref: 00247-2009FLR-EN
- Harms, T., Clifford, R.M. and Cryer, D. (1998) *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Revised Edition (ECERS-R)*, Teachers College Press
- *Environment Rating Scale Extension ECERS–E* (2006) Trentham Books Ltd.
- Harms, T., Clifford, R.M. and Cryer, D. (2003) *Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale, Revised Edition (ITERS-R)*, Teachers College Press
- Laevres, F. (2005) (Ed) *Well-being and Involvement in Care: A process-oriented and self-evaluation instrument for care settings*. Kind and Gezin and the Research Centre for Experiential Education, Leuven University
- *Continuing Quality Improvement: Piecing it all together.*

2.4 Impact of improved learning, playing and interacting on the child

Early Years practitioners develop their practice through training, gaining high-level qualifications, experience, research, and personal reflection which impacts on their attitudes, knowledge, skills and interactions with children. In order to improve the quality of learning, playing and interacting, it is necessary to look with a spotlight through the layers of what practitioners are accustomed to, and focus clearly on the impact on children. Through feedback sessions, discussion and debate the practitioner and EYC will agree ways forward to improve children's experiences.

Children are learning through all their experiences, senses and interactions. In an Early Years setting, taking a careful look at a child's moment-to-moment experience may raise questions about whether the child is actually learning what the adult expected or intended. In some situations there may be missed opportunities for adults to support or extend a child's thinking. At other times the adult may have missed the child's signals and the child may not be mentally involved in the activity in a way that would support learning. It may even be that the child is learning negative messages that the adult would not intend, such as that a particular area of learning is boring, or that adults are not interested in the child's thoughts or feelings.

The critical role of a skilled adult in supporting children's learning is enhanced when practitioners understand how their practices affect children's development as resilient, independent thinkers and learners, as well as how they gain new concepts, knowledge and skills. It can be difficult to analyse one's own practice in this way, since making assumptions through habit is a common occurrence. Being told general principles of good practice is not sufficient. Effective challenge in this area is based on detailed examination of events and interactions as they occur in the setting, followed by reflecting together and identifying the impact on children.

It is in recognising the immediate effects of particular interactions that practitioners can improve their teaching and enhance children's learning.

This moment-by-moment attention to high-quality interactions is the strongest pedagogical tool that adults can bring to their work, and is supported by setting-level analysis of longer-term impact on children's progress.

Find out more:

- *Learning, Playing and Interacting: Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage – The Skilful Practitioner*, pp. 22–27.

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Section 3

Moving practice forward – effective consultancy

The EYC is central to improving learning, playing and interacting and moving practice forward in Early Years settings. Effective consultancy relies on key skills:

- **interpersonal skills** in order to develop professional and collaborative relationships with leaders, managers, practitioners and colleagues across all sectors – including the ability to develop trust, empathise, set boundaries, inspire and motivate others
- **communication skills** in order to communicate in an open way – including the ability to listen actively, respond, question, convey hard messages when necessary, support and challenge appropriately, negotiate and influence for a ‘win-win’ outcome, maintain appropriate records and provide constructive written feedback
- **problem-solving and analytical skills** in order to build capacity within settings, so that leaders and practitioners are able to identify and tackle issues for themselves, thus avoiding excessive dependency on consultants – including the ability to respond flexibly, identify strengths and areas for development, action plan, monitor and evaluate impact, and analyse a range of data
- **observation and interaction skills** in order to provide developmental feedback – including the ability to reflect, listen, watch and record objectively, mentor, coach and facilitate change.

(from Early Years Consultant's Handbook, p. 15)

These skills enable the EYC to form trusting relationships, build capacity, empower others, listen effectively, ask the difficult questions, place the practitioner in a position to consider if all options have been explored, and provide challenge as well as support. The effective consultant uses the skills within a range of processes:

- observation of practice, including scrutiny of planning and records
- feedback which takes place as soon after the observation as possible
- coaching
- modelling
- questioning
- confidence to challenge practice wherever it can be improved
- responding appropriately to resistance
- agreeing ways forward
- agreeing future support
- planned and agreed monitoring and evaluation.

Find out more:

- *Early Years Consultant's Handbook:*
 - Effective Early Years consultancy in action, p. 26
 - Action planning for improvement, p. 27
 - A model for effective consultancy in action, pp. 33–36
- *Primary Consultants' Handbook*
- *Guidance for SIPs: Supporting and challenging improvement in learning and teaching*
- Cockman, P. et al. (1998) *Consulting for Real People: A Client-Centred Approach for Change Agents and Leaders*, McGraw Hill Publishing company.

3.1 Interpersonal skills

Building relationships

In developing professional and collaborative relationships, the EYC should consider how she/he:

- shows empathy
- respects and values individuality
- emphasises shared commitment to providing quality for children
- welcomes feedback/evaluations on their involvement
- gives local examples and personalises materials for settings
- is reliable and efficient.

Responding appropriately to resistance

How EYCs respond to apparent 'resistance' is key to their effectiveness and an important part of the challenge process. Therefore EYCs need to be able to:

- recognise that the process of change can be emotionally upsetting/unsettling
- avoid being confrontational
- employ behaviour management skills
- make no assumptions
- respond calmly and sensitively, and acknowledge emotions
- remember that there is a problem to be addressed together – the people are not the problem
- make the process of change as rewarding and enabling as possible by appealing to the practitioners' / leaders' agenda
- establish clear protocols from the start.

An EYC's story: building relationships and responding appropriately to resistance

The headteacher of a school had requested support from the LA EY team as she was concerned about the quality of provision and lack of children's progress in the newly formed EYFS unit. On my first visit to the school I had been pre-warned by the headteacher that the support she had requested would be welcomed by some and not by others. Although the primary school had always had a nursery on site, falling numbers meant that this was no longer sustainable. Following the introduction of the EYFS, a review of provision and potential future numbers, the headteacher had created an EYFS unit. This was staffed by two full-time teachers and two teaching assistants. The unit had been formed by moving the reception class children into the existing nursery space. The space was a large, open airy room with direct access to outdoors, toilets and a smaller quieter area adjacent to the large space that could be closed off separately.

I met with the team following an initial meeting with the headteacher to introduce myself and explain my role. It was really important for me to 'depersonalise' any potential issues and to highlight the positives of having the opportunity, as a team, to review provision and ensure the children within the unit were able to access the best environment and learning opportunities that they could. I explained what my visits each week would entail and I tried to facilitate an open and honest discussion regarding existing arrangements. This was initially met by a limited response from the team. I asked if the team thought it would be helpful to have an 'external set of eyes' observing one morning – this was agreed, although somewhat reluctantly by one member of staff. I suggested the focus of the observation should be to see how children access areas of provision independently and feedback would be given directly after the visit which was agreed by all. I explained that this would be the protocol for every visit and after every feedback session we would have opportunities for discussion and to agree actions for the next time.

The observation provided evidence regarding the inadequacy of the provision in terms of layout, accessibility and content. Each piece of evidence was provided in the context of a child within the setting. The children did not independently access the resources and when they did there was very low-level learning occurring. The environment did not enable child-initiated learning and playful activity. During the feedback session some members of staff became upset and there were lots of tears; it was important as a consultant to be understanding of the emotions of the whole team. Change is easy for some and really hard for others. The situation was no fault of any individual and it was important for me to highlight this. I also emphasised the need to look forward and not back and most importantly the reason for doing all of this was for the children. This meeting was really tough but a real turning point. It was like opening a huge can of worms but once seen out of the can somehow there was an acceptance. I remained positive throughout the meeting – and through the weeks ahead!

What followed, during the next three months, was in essence not only a significant change to the learning environment but also a review of all learning and teaching within the unit. Weekly visits progressed to fortnightly visits and enabled one-to-one support to be provided to each individual member of the team – thoughts on the process were shared in confidence and individual concerns addressed. I also welcomed feedback on my involvement which helped me to adapt my support and interactions with individuals and the team. Initially the practitioners were reluctant to provide this but as our relationships developed the benefits of this were recognised and it became easier for the practitioners to provide honest feedback.

The headteacher commented on the change in ethos of the team. Their confidence, particularly that of the teaching assistants, rose. The member of staff who had been resistant over time began to work with rather than against. It was so clear to see from the outcomes of the children that above anything else the process, however painful at times, had been worthwhile.

As a consultant, on reflection, the most important element had been the depersonalisation of the problem. The acknowledgement that different practitioners need different periods of time to accept change had been hard, especially as I am a person who readily accepts it, but it had also proved crucial to the success of the support. Another successful aspect was the 'two-way' process for giving feedback, which developed throughout the time I spent in the school and which also contributed to building and developing professional and collaborative relationships.

3.2 Communication skills

Active listening

Active listening is a vital skill which communicates that EYCs are engaged and are attentive to the practitioner. Effective active listening needs to include the following elements to maintain engagement:

- eye contact
- attention to seating positions and body language
- affirmation
- recognition of what is being said
- reflecting feelings
- encouraging, acknowledging, checking and clarifying
- showing empathy
- asking open-ended questions
- time for talk in balance of the practitioner
- brief, accurate summary of the points put forward.

It is also useful to echo the practitioner's verbal responses, e.g. 'Am I correct in saying...' 'Would it be true to say that...' 'I think you're telling me...'

Effective active listening is a key consultancy skill in building relationships, reducing resistance and agreeing ways forward. It is the foundation of interaction and feedback. The skills of active listening are very different from the way we listen in everyday conversation. Active listening is not a passive process but one which demands understanding of what a person is saying and reflecting the meaning back to them. This enables people to arrive at their own conclusions and identify potential steps for improvement.

Questioning

Questioning is a key skill in supporting practitioners to reflect and develop their own understanding, and is part of the process of sustained shared thinking. Questions can be carefully phrased to unpick practitioners' current thinking and spur consideration of new areas. Open questions will allow the greatest reflection and discussion. Examples could include:

- What do you want to achieve?
- How do you think things are going?
- How do you feel?
- What was your thinking about that session?
- Tell me why you planned it in that way?
- I noticed...What do you think the effect of that was on (the child)?
- What do you think would happen if...?
- What else?
- What might be the impact of...?

Negotiating

Negotiating effectively can be one of the most difficult aspects of consultancy. Effective negotiation relies on the ability to assess a situation and its possibilities, and also to judge the capabilities of others. Negotiating often involves the resolution of differing points of view about what is needed, by ensuring that opinions are aired and workable compromises agreed.

Good negotiating involves:

- seeking everyone's opinions
- ensuring that people feel that their views are important
- listening without interruption but knowing when to intervene
- changing one's mind when there are good reasons for doing so and informing others why
- working together to resolve misunderstandings
- acknowledging difficult issues and facing up to them
- finding ways of overcoming conflicts
- compromising but knowing when not to compromise
- having alternatives or fall-back positions
- being skilful in choosing the most important points to take forward in order to have the maximum impact on improvement
- staying calm and professional.

Opportunity for reflection:

- Reflect on the ways in which you use active listening, questioning and negotiating in your challenge role.
- Note three things which you could do to help you to further develop these skills.

Notes of visit

All consultants' work with settings needs to be transparent. Each LA will have its own way of recording visits but consultants are usually required to write a note of visit (NoV) as a result of the work undertaken with a setting, reporting on strengths, areas of development and actions to be carried out.

Key principles for writing notes of visit:

- The report should be accurate, factual and evaluate the focus of the visit against known and shared criteria, e.g. quality of learning and teaching.
- It should be an evaluation of the visit, not a description of it.
- The note of visit should be written in accessible language for a range of audiences, e.g. leaders, practitioners, governors and other agency colleagues.
- Key sources of evidence are cited and acknowledged within the note of visit.
- Data (where appropriate) is used effectively.
- Recommendations for actions arise out of the evaluation and are clearly noted, achievable and time-lined.
- Progress is reviewed where there is an ongoing level of support or challenge, e.g. progress toward completing previously agreed actions is noted.
- Dissemination of best practice is noted and acted upon.
- The NoV should be helpful in planning improvements and making progress.

Notes of visit should be formal, impersonal and brief, but include sufficient detail to record what has been agreed as the end product of the discussion/visit. Effective NoVs will summarise what has been achieved and include manageable action points.

In preparing for a setting visit, EYCs should build into their schedule time to review and reflect on previous notes of visits and think through possible next steps for the setting as a result of the impending visit.

LAs usually have their own guidance for completing a NoV; however, the following may be useful for consideration:

- keep forms brief but include enough detail to record what has been discussed, for example, with subheadings and elaboration
- the NoV is 'topped and tailed' to give the date, the focus of visit and the names of those who have agreed it
- record a review of agreed actions from the last visit and an evaluation of the impact on children's progress
- keep it formal and impersonal
- do not mention practitioners or yourself by name in the narrative
- record what has happened objectively in order to formulate any judgements that are made
- ensure that specific actions and timescales are agreed before leaving
- agree key actions for colleagues in the setting as well as for yourself
- set dates for your next visit
- agree the NoV with the setting within the timescale.

3.3 Observation and interaction skills

Observing practice

Observation of playing, learning and interacting is an important element in gathering information about the strengths and areas for development of a setting and the practitioners. It will confirm strengths; validate what people are already aware of; highlight aspects of practice that need development; support practitioners and leaders to be self-reflective and improve the quality of practice. **To challenge and improve practice in a setting it is essential to observe both child-initiated play and focused learning both indoors and out.**

Key principles for observing practice:

- Observation is based on a respectful relationship with practitioners and settings.
- Observation is intended to highlight strengths and areas for development with regard to improving the quality of learning, playing and interacting, and children's outcomes.
- The observation must have a purpose – to enable appropriate extension, support or intervention to be planned.
- Practitioners and settings should be fully involved and actively engaged in the focus, purpose and process of observation with an agreement being confirmed in advance of the observation.
- Agreement needs to be made as to how the feedback is shared with the leader/manager. It could be a joint observation or the leader/manager joins the feedback.
- The observer must ensure that agreed time lines of the length of the observation and feedback opportunity are adhered to.

Observation involves building up a picture of a practitioner/setting's stage of development in order to:

- plan the next steps in the practitioner's and setting's learning journey to improved quality
- action plan to enable these next steps to be successful
- help the practitioner/setting in developing provision and practice
- mark staging posts in a practitioner's/setting's development and learning
- evaluate the impact of the quality of provision, environment and the level of practitioner training on children's learning and development.

The type and purpose of an observation will depend on a number of factors, including the stage of development of the setting, the relationship between the Early Years Consultant and the practitioner/setting, and the practitioner's experience of being observed.

Before the observation takes place:

- Agree the practicalities, protocols and scope of the observation which should be in line with LA policy. For example:
 - **The time** – how long will the observer be there?
 - **The focus** – what is to be the focus of the observation – is it around particular interaction strategies or area(s) of learning?
 - **The context** – is it going to focus on the practitioner working with a whole group, smaller group, or individual child?
 - **The dynamics** – is it to be a joint observation with the manager/leader or solely the EYC?
 - **Format of the observation** – does the practitioner understand that the observer will move around the environment, talking to children and adults but not interrupting the flow of the session?
- It is helpful to have an overview of the learning environment and the session to be observed. Scrutiny of planning/paper work and records will supplement discussion and provide information about the group being observed, e.g. any children with identified needs, the context of the session, and what the planned activities for the session might be, including how they have been decided upon.
- Agree on a time when verbal feedback can be given – sooner rather than later – and the type of written feedback to be provided, which should again be in line with LA policy and protocols.

During:

- Use an agreed observation schedule (see appendices for examples).
- Engage with and talk to children about what they are doing.
- Look at profiles of some children you have spoken with.
- Talk to staff about what they are doing, if appropriate.
- Speak with parents about what their children are learning, if appropriate.

Providing constructive feedback

It is important to give verbal feedback at the agreed time, in line with LA policy. Immediately afterwards may not be possible but it should be as soon as is convenient. Set the scene for the purpose of the feedback. You may find the following prompts for providing constructive feedback helpful.

Prompts for constructive feedback

Good feedback evaluates the quality of learning, playing and interacting – and does not merely describe what happened.

Prepare for feedback:

- decide on an appropriate time to hold the discussion when you can both/all give it your full attention
- ensure that you have a clear grasp of the key points in line with the observation criteria
- decide the key point you feel would be most powerful in the development of the practitioner
- identify strengths of the practitioner to feed back
- plan to adopt a constructive, lively, collegiate approach
- do not make assumptions or decisions about 'why' the practitioner/leader acted in a particular way; this blocks communication.

Providing feedback:

- encourage two-way dialogue: share your observations and encourage your colleague's response
- ask open questions, e.g. 'How do you think the session went?' 'What did you think about the activity?' 'Why did you decide...?' 'How did you feel about...?' 'Where do you think the activity went well/was less successful?' 'Who do you think...?' 'When did you find...?'
- focus your questions on the impact on children's learning, noting particular children where appropriate, e.g. 'How do you think the children benefited...or enjoyed it?' 'What about xx?' 'Was the outcome different for xxx from what you expected?'
- 'tune in' to your listener's feelings about the observation and ask the practitioner for feedback on how the process is going for them
- help practitioners/leaders reach their own conclusions about the quality of their work/interactions, i.e. their own strengths and areas for improvement
- use your observation notes to illustrate your findings
- be ready to explain and justify your observations
- avoid being prescriptive during feedback, e.g. avoid telling practitioners/leaders, 'you should', 'you ought to', 'it would be better to'
- give an accurate picture of your observation; include an appropriate balance of strengths and areas for improvement
- show sensitivity when the messages you want to share reflect a concern about a practitioner's/leader's work
- be selective about what you feed back if there are substantial areas for improvement; concentrate on one or two significant areas for development and ensure you feed back strengths as well.

And finally:

- always give more positives than areas for development
- end with the practitioner recounting the areas of development and what she/he will do differently – including timescales for such actions – and discussing the strengths of what has been observed.

Opportunity for reflection:

- Think about the ways in which you encourage the practitioners you work with to provide feedback to you on your support and challenge.
- How might you use this feedback to develop and further improve your own practice?

3.4 Coaching for improved learning, playing and interacting

Coaching is a particularly effective approach to improving learning, playing and interacting because it reaches directly into the setting. It develops practitioner expertise by focusing on actual learning of real children and involves professional dialogue. It creates a climate in which it becomes normal to experiment with new ideas and to share good practice. It provides a focus for debate, encouraging professional reflection on what has and has not worked, revealing and exploring practitioners' beliefs.

Further support for EYCs in developing coaching skills will be provided by National Strategies Early Years Regional Advisers as part of the continuing professional development offer.

Key principles for coaching:

- Practice can be improved when there is an agreed focus on goals and finding solutions, and a willingness to explore new approaches and learn.
- Improvements develop from the individual potential of practitioners – there is no uniform prescribed solution.
- Coaching is a cooperative venture in which the person being coached is responsible for results, while the coach assists in defining goals, checking present reality and generating options.
- Versatile, creative development is best supported by a facilitative style of coaching, in which the person being coached does most of the talking and the coach does most of the listening and asks most of the questions.

Good coaching involves:

- having a clear understanding of the principles of coaching
- using interpersonal skills to build relationships
- establishing trust
- being supportive and putting people at ease – not being judgemental
- being sensitive to other people's anxieties
- encouraging others to reflect on their teaching and to question their practice, seeking to constantly improve, regardless of current level
- being focused – seeing the detail as well as the big picture
- guiding the discussion – providing challenge as well as support
- being flexible enough to work within and across areas of learning in sharing and developing a repertoire of pedagogical skills
- seeing it as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event.

The coaching process – the GROW model

Since coaching involves supporting individual practitioner growth rather than providing top-down prescriptions, the acronym GROW provides a useful summary of the coaching process:

- **Goals** – support the practitioner to identify what they want to achieve, and why; how do they know this is an area to develop?

- **Reality** – support reflection on current practice; this may include discussion of observations and the impact on children’s learning
- **Options** – identify together possible solutions, new approaches to try
- **Way forward** – agree on actions, time lines, support, and ways to overcome barriers.

3.5 Modelling good practice

Demonstrating or modelling of good practice that can be observed by the practitioner and then discussed and analysed afterwards has many advantages. It is accepted learning theory that the more active participation and sensory involvement there is by the learner, the more effective learning will be. When an activity or effective practice is modelled, practitioners will see, hear and experience the event in a real-life context. It will help to present ideas and concepts more clearly and will reinforce learning.

Demonstration or modelling sessions in settings should be undertaken, remembering that effective professional development activities should:

- be directly relevant to participants
- have clearly intended and identified outcomes
- take into account previous knowledge and expertise
- have an agreed method of evaluating the impact on practice.

In using modelling to support the challenge role and improve learning, playing and interacting it would be helpful for EYCs to ask themselves the following questions:

- **Have you agreed with the practitioner the specific focus, purpose and outcome of the demonstration?**
Every demonstration or modelling session should have a specific focus, purpose and identified outcome that has been agreed with the practitioner before the session takes place.
- **Is the demonstration session directly relevant to the participants?**
This includes both children and practitioners.
- **Have you agreed a suitable time for the demonstration session?**
This may seem like a simple thing to organise but in a very busy setting it is important that the time is agreed with the practitioner well in advance. It is crucial that the practitioner will be able to focus on the activity and not be called away halfway through the demonstration.
- **Have you agreed on the next steps?**
It is important that the demonstration leads to changes and improvements in practice, so the follow-up is very important.
- **How will the practitioner take this learning forward?**
A discussion should take place as soon as possible after the demonstration covering:
 - what was observed
 - how this differs from existing practice
 - how changes can be made to practice
 - how the practitioner will implement any necessary changes to practice.
- **Have you agreed on a method of evaluating the impact on practice?**
A method for demonstrating changes made and measuring impact on practice should be agreed with the practitioner.

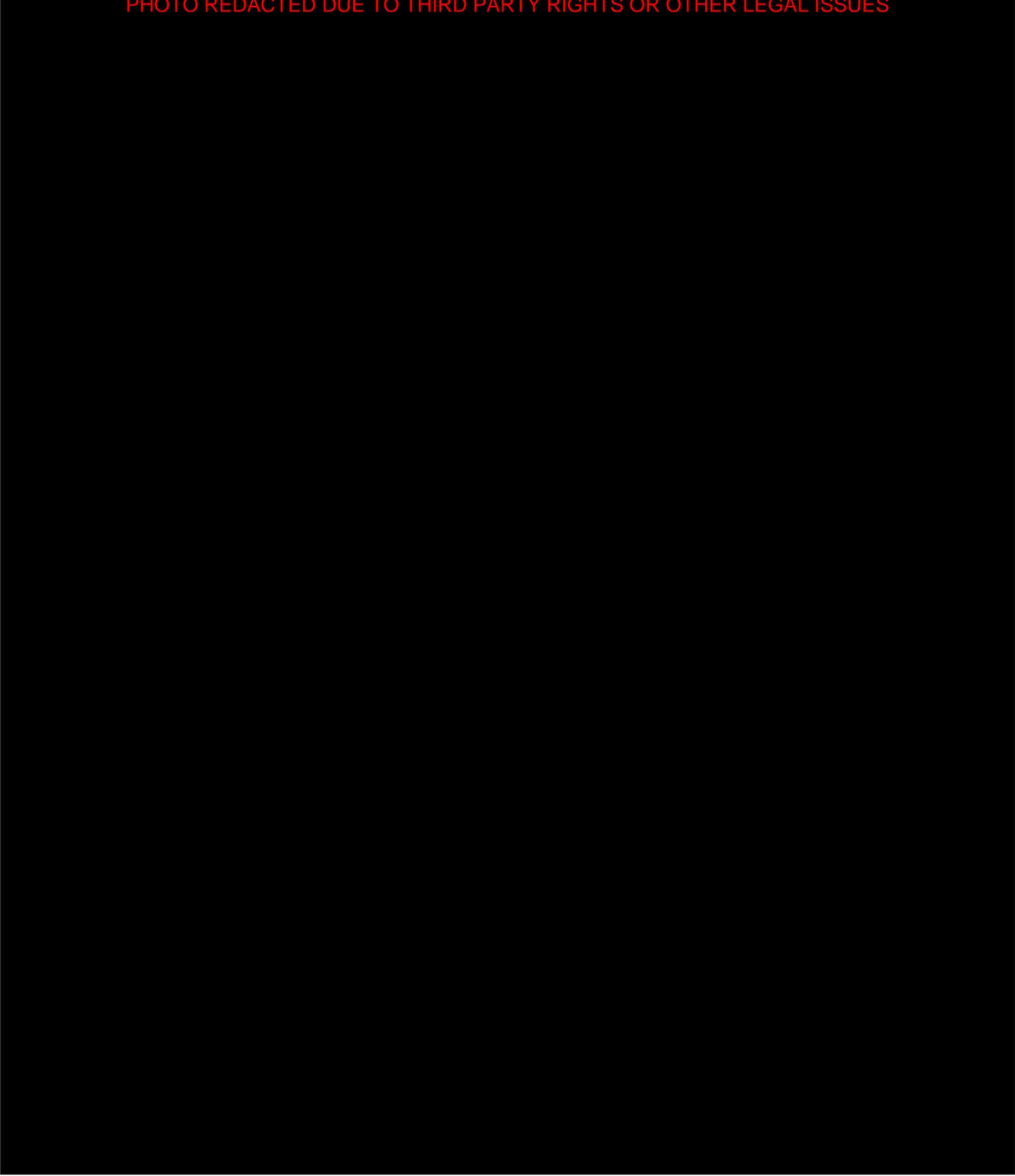
- **Have you encouraged 'two-way' feedback?**

It is important to provide an opportunity for the practitioner to give feedback on the demonstration session and to think about how what has been observed could be further extended. This can be a powerful learning opportunity for both the practitioner and the EYC.

Opportunity for reflection:

- Reflect on the ways in which you use coaching and modelling/demonstrating in your role.
- Note three things which you could do to help you to further develop your use of these processes.

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Appendices

Observation of learning, playing and interacting in the EYFS (adult-led)

Practitioner observed _____ Observer _____
 Date _____ Context _____ Purpose _____

Possible prompts	Observation notes	Reflection: Impact on learning
<p>Close, caring and respectful relationships</p> <p>Encourage and support children to relate to others</p> <p>Support children to resolve conflicts through problem-solving</p> <p>Observe children as a natural part of all normal activity</p> <p>Interpret children's actions and words to try to understand the child's thinking and learning</p> <p>Scaffold children's learning through talk, discuss strategies and ideas, suggest possibilities and model approaches</p> <p>Provide brief, well-planned, focused learning opportunities in response to observed interests, learning and development</p> <p>Use daily events within the routine to provide worthwhile, real-life experiences</p> <p>Vary experiences, using fresh, creative and playful approaches</p> <p>Provide first-hand experiences to explore and discover</p> <p>Directly teach through demonstrating or explaining</p> <p>Support children to persevere through difficulties, to take risks, to ask questions and problem-solve</p> <p>Use the language of learning to focus children on themselves as learners</p> <p>Identify and support next steps in learning</p>		

Observation of learning, playing and interacting in the EYFS (child-initiated)

Practitioner observed _____ Observer _____

Date _____ Context _____ Purpose _____

Possible prompts	Observation notes	Reflection: Impact on learning
<p>Close, caring and respectful relationships</p> <p>Encourage and support children to relate to others</p> <p>Support children to resolve conflicts through problem-solving</p> <p>Ensure sustained time to develop child-initiated activities</p> <p>Arrange, resource, and make time for children to freely use rich indoor and outdoor spaces</p> <p>Observe children as a natural part of all normal activity</p> <p>Interpret children's actions and words to try to understand the child's thinking and learning</p> <p>Use sensitivity when deciding when to interact</p> <p>Join in play and child-initiated activity following children's agendas</p> <p>Scaffold children's learning through talk, discuss strategies and ideas, suggest possibilities and model approaches</p> <p>Use daily events within the routine to provide worthwhile, real-life experiences</p> <p>Directly teach, demonstrating or explaining</p> <p>Support children to persevere through difficulties, to take risks, to ask questions and problem-solve</p> <p>Use the language of learning to focus children on themselves as learners</p> <p>Identify and support next steps in learning</p>		

Observation of learning, playing and interacting in the EYFS – Discussion record

Elements of effective practice

Practitioner's key strength

Areas of development

Possible next steps

Date of feedback _____

Signed _____

Observation of learning, playing and interacting in the EYFS (adult-led)

Practitioner observed Emma Observer EYC
 Date 12/02/10 Context small group - planting bean seeds
 Purpose review effectiveness of support for children's thinking

Possible prompts	Observation notes	Reflection: Impact on learning
<p>Close, caring and respectful relationships</p> <p>Encourage and support children to relate to others</p> <p>Support children to resolve conflicts through problem-solving</p> <p>Observe children as a natural part of all normal activity</p> <p>Interpret children's actions and words to try to understand the child's thinking and learning</p> <p>Scaffold children's learning through talk, discuss strategies and ideas, suggest possibilities and model approaches</p> <p>Provide brief, well-planned, focused learning opportunities in response to observed interests, learning and development</p> <p>Use daily events within the routine to provide worthwhile, real-life experiences</p> <p>Vary experiences, using fresh, creative and playful approaches</p> <p>Provide first-hand experiences to explore and discover</p> <p>Directly teach through demonstrating or explaining</p> <p>Support children to persevere through difficulties, to take risks, to ask questions and problem-solve</p> <p>Use the language of learning to focus children on themselves as learners</p> <p>Identify and support next steps in learning</p>	<p>Materials were prepared - yoghurt pots, spoons, compost, bean seed packs, jug of water.</p> <p>Several children crowded round the table, and Emma selected four to have a go first, sent others off to choose another activity.</p> <p>Emma first demonstrated, then children took turns to spoon in compost, push bean in, and water - waiting between each stage.</p> <p>Child said, 'I planted seeds in my garden - lettuce seeds.' Emma: 'Did you? With Mummy? That's nice, isn't it?'</p> <p>Some conversation about what will grow - Child: 'It will be a big, big plant, like Jack's'. Emma: 'Well, first we have to get them planted carefully.'</p> <p>Water jug was too big for children to manage alone; Emma held to support for each child.</p> <p>First group sent to place pots on windowsill and choose another activity; Emma called next four to join her - two girls in role-play area were reluctant but came when Emma said 'It will only take a minute and then you can go back to the house.'</p>	<p>(Completed in discussion between practitioner and observer)</p> <p>Some children were disappointed - less motivated for child-initiated activity?</p> <p>Focus on getting the job done left little time for children to first explore the materials, or to talk - children couldn't easily relate to their previous knowledge or experience</p> <p>Waiting for turns lowered involvement</p> <p>Missed opportunity to draw out child's thinking, and encourage sharing with peers</p> <p>Reduced independence; could have provided smaller jug; or asked children for other ideas of how to add the water by themselves</p> <p>Child-initiated activity interrupted - child sees herself/himself as less valued by adult? 'Flow' of play broken</p>

Observation of learning, playing and interacting in the EYFS – Discussion record

Elements of effective practice

The activity was planned as part of a sequence including use of story and visit to allotments to provide a context for children's learning. It was hands-on, and prepared so that children could get stuck in quickly.

The relationships were warm and considerate, and practitioner and children clearly enjoyed each other's company. Emma observed children's responses throughout the activity, and was able to discuss individual children's experiences.

Practitioner's key strength

Clear demonstration and explanation of the planting process to the children, with appropriate language and pace.

Good relationships have been established with the children.

Areas of development

Important to be clear about the learning objectives - while learning about content (e.g. seeds grow into plants), PSED and communication are also important and supported individually in the interactions. Adult-led activities, even when there is a 'product' or outcome, are better learning opportunities when they enable children to explore materials, problem-solve and do things in their own way - exploration and discovery are important elements.

Time is needed for conversation, and 'playing around' with materials and ideas. Adult as listener - supporting and extending what children say, for example following through with the child who planted lettuce seeds, facilitating children to talk together about the activity rather than doing most of the talking.

Organisation of session - ensuring adult-led activity is managed so that play is valued, supported and not interrupted.

Possible next steps

- *Joint planning of a small-group activity, with open-ended possibilities.*
- *EYC to model - particular focus on supporting children's thinking through talk.*
- *CPD on interaction strategies to support children's thinking - course next term.*

Date of feedback 12/02/10

Signed Emma EYC

Observation record

Setting:	Date:
Leader/Manager:	Time: start: end:
Practitioner(s):	Observer:
Contextual information: (including SEN, EAL, CIC, etc.)	Age Range:
	Focus:
Organisation (e.g. child-initiated, adult-led, whole groups, individual, etc.)	
Observation notes	

Observation evaluation/discussion notes

Strengths:	
Areas for development:	
Agreed actions by:	Timescale:
EYC:	
Leader/Manager:	
Practitioner(s):	

Sample note of visit

Agreed actions by:	Timescale:
Date of visit:	Local authority contact:
Purpose of visit:	
Review of agreed actions and impact on children's progress:	
Evaluation of visit:	
Agreed actions – setting:	
Agreed actions – EYC:	
Date/time of next visit:	

Resources

Communication, Language and Literacy Development Programme – Consultant file
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00247-2009FLR-EN

Continuing Quality Improvement: Piecing it all together
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies

Early Years Consultant's Handbook
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00127-2008BKT-EN

Early Years Foundation Stage: Setting the Standards for Learning, Development and Care for children from birth to five
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00261-2008PCK-EN

Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP)
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00669-2008

Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP)
Professional Development Meetings: Offering effective challenge as well as support.
The analysis and use of data in the context of support and challenge.
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00372-2009FLR-EN

Environment Rating Scale Extension ECERS–E (2006) Trentham Books Ltd.

Every Child a Talker: Guidance for Early Language Lead Practitioners
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00854-2008FLR-EN

Every Child a Talker: Guidance for Consultants
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00328-2008FLR-EN

Guidance for SIPs: Supporting and challenging improvement in learning and teaching
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00614-2009BKT-EN

Harms, T., Clifford, R.M. and Cryer, D. (1998) *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Revised Edition* (ECERS-R), Teachers College Press

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Learning, Playing and Interacting: Good practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00775-2009BKT-EN

Primary Consultants' Handbook
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00161-2009DOM-EN

Progress Matters: Reviewing and enhancing young children's development
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00217-2009BKT-EN

Social and Emotional Aspects of Development: Guidance for practitioners working in the Early Years Foundation Stage
www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/nationalstrategies Ref: 00707-2008BKT-EN

Further reading

- Broadhead, P., Howard, J. and Wood, E. (2010) *Play and Learning in Early Childhood Settings – Theory and Practice*, Sage, London.
- Cockman, P. et al. (1998) *Consulting for Real People: A Client-Centred Approach for Change Agents and Leaders*, McGraw Hill Publishing company.
- Edwards, S. and Brooker, E. (2010) (Eds) *Rethinking Play*, Open University Press, Maidenhead.
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- Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2008) 'Understanding the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and progression in learning in early childhood', *Hong Kong Journal of Early Childhood Education*, 7 (2), 3–13.
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- Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Taggart, B., Sammons, P. and Melhuish, E. (2003) *The EPPE case studies Technical Paper 10*. University of London, Institute of Education/DfEE. ISBN: 085473 601.
- Sylva, K., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2006) *Assessing Quality in the Early Years – Early Childhood*. Trentham Books Ltd.
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