

**Primary**

*National Strategy*

# **Confident, capable and creative: supporting boys' achievements**

**Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years  
Foundation Stage**

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department for  
**children, schools and families**



# Confident, capable and creative: supporting boys' achievements

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## Note

Both parents and carers of children are included in the term 'parent' where used in this booklet



## What is this booklet about?

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) states that *“All children, irrespective of ethnicity, culture or religion, home language, family background, learning difficulties or disabilities, gender or ability should have the opportunity to experience a challenging and enjoyable programme of learning and development.”* (EYFS Statutory Guidance)

This booklet provides guidance for all practitioners to ensure that this entitlement is met for boys as well as girls during their time in the EYFS. Using the four principles of the EYFS as a framework, it provides examples of effective practice and encourages practitioners to reflect on the quality of their provision, ask questions and find solutions. We have drawn on the experience and expertise of early years practitioners who are currently actively engaged in researchful practice to explore what works best for boys.

## Why focus on boys?

The Foundation Stage Profile provides a holistic, broad-based assessment of children’s progress across six areas of learning and development. National data from the Profile, 2004–2006, suggests that boys are achieving less well than girls across all areas of learning and that more girls are working securely within the early learning goals than boys.

These early gender differences in achievement reflect a pattern that can continue into Key Stage 4. An analysis of GCSE results indicates that white British boys comprise nearly half of all low achievers, with boys generally outnumbering girls by 20% (Rowntree Report, 2007).

An Ofsted survey of 144 Foundation Stage settings published in March 2007 provides further interesting insights, suggesting that practitioners could address this imbalance if they took more responsibility for creating the right conditions for boys’ learning. The survey recommends that *‘staff in settings should... help boys to achieve more rapidly by providing opportunities for learning that engage them.’*

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## Why might boys underachieve?

Boys are not less able than girls, so perhaps we do need to look at our own attitudes, if we are to better understand why they are making less progress in the EYFS and beyond. The quality of our relationships with them, and the values we hold will impact on boys' ability to engage confidently in the learning process. Are we planning experiences for boys that build on their interests and value their strengths as active learners and problem solvers, or are we simply expecting them to be compliant, passive recipients of new skills and knowledge? Are we utilising boys' fascinations and learning preferences as starting points for our planning?

## Building confidence and self-esteem

Creating the right conditions for children to develop confidence in themselves as learners, explorers, discoverers and critical thinkers is vital in a rapidly changing world. This is particularly important for boys as their natural exuberance, energy and keen exploratory drive may often be misinterpreted. Unwittingly, boys can be labelled and their behaviour perceived as inappropriate or even challenging. The qualities and skills that are most valued by schools, the ability to communicate orally and represent ideas on paper, are often the very aspects of learning that boys find the most difficult.

*"The view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life... the belief that cherished qualities can be developed creates a passion for learning." (Dweck, 2006)*

Where do our beliefs about ourselves as learners come from? We know that the way we see ourselves is shaped by the messages we receive from the significant people in our lives. When we receive encouragement for our efforts and know that our ideas are valued, our feelings acknowledged and our discoveries recognised, we come to see the world as a safe place, and ourselves as competent and capable agents within it. These positive messages give us the confidence to take on the risks and challenges that all new learning brings. We become keen to learn, challenges are welcomed and failures are simply seen as opportunities for further problem solving and exploration.

Are the experiences we offer our children helping them to see learning in this way and develop a 'can do' approach? Could it be that boys are developing negative images of themselves as learners and essentially disengaging from formal learning right from the start? If they are picking up messages that their natural curiosity is wrong, their exploratory drives will be stifled. If they perceive that their strengths, interests and learning preferences are not respected, they will lose interest in the learning process. If they are expected to engage for long periods in de-contextualised activities that hold no meaning for them and are physically uncomfortable it is hardly surprising that they switch off.

This extract, from an interview with two boys found in the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) study on the transition from the Foundation Stage to Year 1, illustrates this point well (NFER, 2005):

**Researcher:** 'Is there anything you don't like about being in Year 1?'

**First boy:** 'Being on the carpet for a long time.'

**Second boy:** 'Neither do I because it's very boring.'

**First boy:** 'And it wastes our time playing.'

**Second boy:** 'It wastes your life.'



## What do practitioners need to do?

We need to make sure that the opportunities we are providing for boys in the EYFS fully engage and support them in developing positive dispositions to learning. The OECD report 'Starting Strong' asserts that we need to identify the successful strategies that will build gender equality. *"We know that to give boys and girls equal rights in the early years means to give them different and specific opportunities. It is not sufficient to say that everything... is open to all children, since at this age children choose gender specific activities."* (Svaleryd in OECD, 2004)

As practitioners working with children in their earliest years, are we tuned in enough to offer the kinds of experiences that will fully support boys as well as girls in becoming life-long, life-wide learners?

We need to ensure that we pay attention to the strengths, interests and learning preferences of every child. How do we know what makes them tick? When we use this knowledge to support children in their learning journeys, taking their strengths and interests as the starting points, we show that we value them as unique individuals. This means observing and listening to each child with an open mind, discovering what interests them and deciding the best approach to take to support them in their future learning.

*"Learning is a continuous journey through which children build on all the things they have already experienced and come across new and interesting challenges. Every child's learning journey takes a personal path based on their own individual interests, experiences and the curriculum on offer."* (EYFS card 3.2 *Enabling Environments*)

When young children are encouraged to think creatively by following their own lines of enquiry, exploring possibilities, making new connections and solving problems, they are developing the skills for life-long learning. In this way they develop confidence in themselves, both as thinkers and as learners. This approach demands practitioners who take the time to tune into children's thinking and trust the richness of children's ideas. Is this of particular importance for boys?

### Points for reflection

- How do you find out what makes the boys in your setting tick?
- How do you support their learning journeys and show you value their interests and experiences?



## Raising awareness of effective practice

Increasingly, local authorities (LAs) and practitioners are using 'action research' to support them in finding answers to these questions. When practitioners see themselves as co-researchers, working alongside the children to gain deeper insights into the learning process, they are modelling many key skills, including enquiry, creativity, information processing, problem solving and communication. These metacognitive skills are the building blocks of lifelong learning.

One example of action research focusing on boys in the reception year is the Brent Foundation Stage ICT project carried out in 2006 with support from the National Strategies. The project provided a catalyst for practitioners to become more deeply involved in boys' learning. As they followed the boys' agendas and lines of enquiry, using ICT to document their experiences, they noted sudden and dramatic improvements in the boys' speaking and listening skills and behaviour. (See [www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/casestudies](http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/casestudies) for further details).

Effective, researchful practice that captures the positive learning experiences of boys is developing across the country. We are beginning to add some examples to our website, but we would love to add more. We are hoping to offer practitioners an opportunity to share their action research via our website. Web based case studies will need to demonstrate how researchful practice has informed and improved the quality of provision for boys in the EYFS. If you have any examples that you would like to share please contact [foundation.stage@nationalstrategies.co.uk](mailto:foundation.stage@nationalstrategies.co.uk). Criteria for selection are explained in the following box:

### Case studies: what we are looking for

We are hoping to offer practitioners an opportunity to share their action research via our website.

Web based case studies will need to provide evidence of the impact that this is having on the quality of provision for boys in the EYFS. Criteria for selection will include the following points:

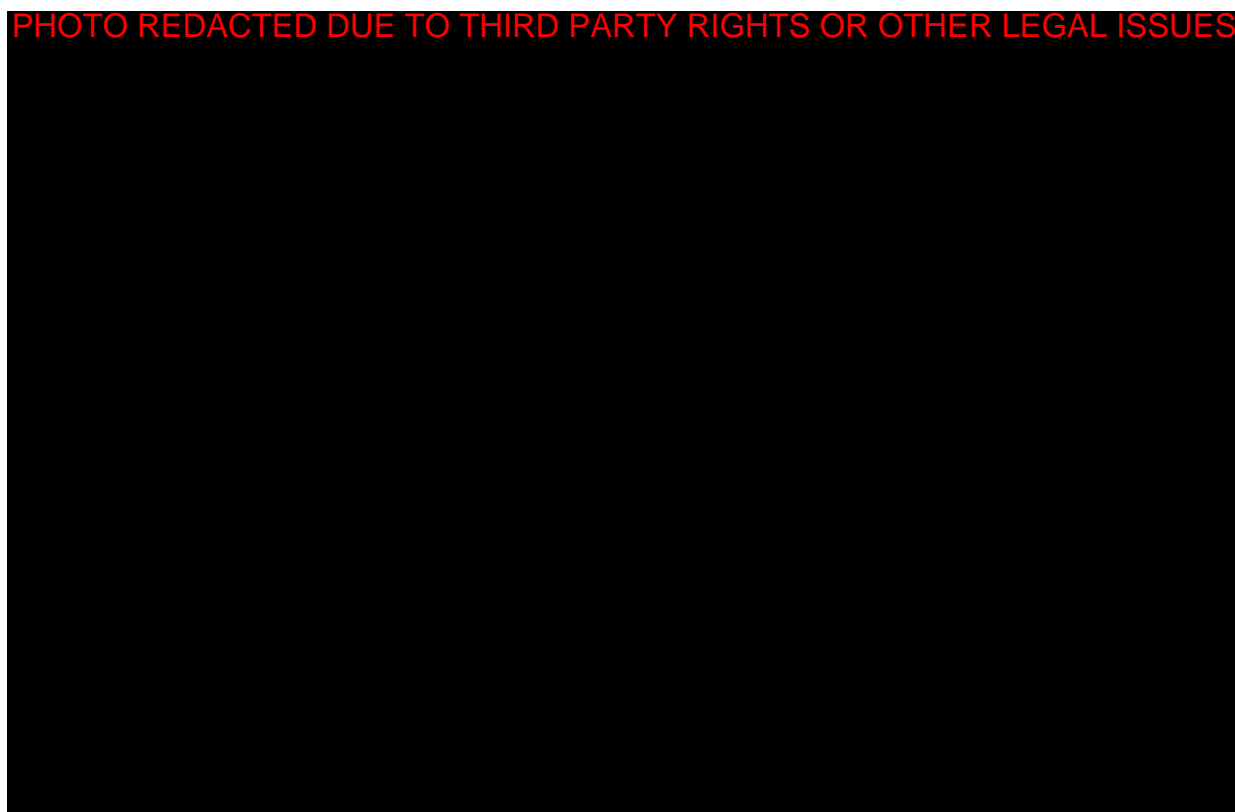
- clear support for the principles of EYFS;
- practitioners trusting the children's imagination, ideas and self-expression and using these as starting points for planning;
- practitioners reflecting on their practice and demonstrating the impact on the quality of their provision;
- practitioners demonstrating respect for parents, children and practitioners by capturing their perspectives and voices.



## Using the EYFS principles to inform and develop practice

The EYFS clearly establishes four overarching principles to inform our thinking and practice in order to meet all young children's entitlement to rich and engaging learning experiences.

On the following pages we have used these principles as a frame to support practitioners and settings in reflection, self evaluation and the ongoing development of their practice. Each section has an example of innovative practice that is supporting boys' learning in the EYFS, suggestions for effective practice, possible challenges and dilemmas and questions for reflection.





## A Unique Child

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### EYFS Principle: Every child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.

1.1 **Child Development:** Babies and children develop in individual ways and at varying rates. Every area of development – physical, cognitive, linguistic, spiritual, social and emotional – is equally important.

1.2 **Inclusive Practice:** The diversity of individuals and communities is valued and respected. No child or family is discriminated against.

1.3 **Keeping Safe:** Young children are vulnerable. They develop resilience when their physical and psychological well-being is protected by adults.

1.4 **Health and Well-Being:** Children's health is an integral part of their emotional, mental, social, environmental and spiritual well-being and is supported by attention to these aspects.

All children are unique individuals who develop in individual ways. However, it is all too easy to stereotype children along gender lines, even if this process is unconscious. As adults we differentiate between boys and girls from birth in all sorts of ways – from how we dress them to how we speak to them and expect them to behave. Children very quickly pick up our views on what is appropriate for a boy or girl to do and will often express these views themselves in very determined ways.

We often see that in their own self-initiated play, boys' interests, choices and approaches to play can be different from girls'. If these interests and choices are valued and supported, boys are more likely to develop positive attitudes about themselves as learners. As Kate Pahl notes: *"Much successful practice in the early years consist of following ideas and play generated by the children, building on the children's trains of thought, and allowing their narratives to flower."* (Pahl, Kate (1999))

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### Case study: Valuing every child

The 'House of Objects' was a month-long project in 2007, run by North Tyneside Early Arts working in partnership with the LA's Early Years consultant team. The project gave 1000 children, their practitioners and parents an opportunity to develop their creative expression through access to a range of tools and interesting and unusual reclaimed materials. A thorough health and safety check was made on all the materials provided.

Early years settings, Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 classes were invited to attend half-day sessions at the House where they were supported by an Early Years professional, an artist and a documenter, recording how children used the resources and environment. A key finding was the positive impact of this experience on the boys' dispositions to learning, by enabling them to explore such a wide range of imaginative materials in this 'warehouse of wonders'. The children were given freedom and encouragement, autonomy and responsibility, and time and space to explore the resources, making use of the indoor and outdoor environment. The LA is hoping to maintain the House of Objects as a permanent part of their Early Years Support Service.

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## House of Objects

### Documenting the learning: Making imaginary electricity

A group of boys from a nursery class had already had the opportunity to explore electric circuits with batteries and bulbs in their nursery setting. In the House of Objects they find a circuit board. They are curious and already have theories about what it is.

“Don’t touch it, it’s electric.”

“It’s inside a engine.”

“I think it’s inside a computer cos my Dad’s computer got a socket like that.”

They find an adult to ask. Identified as a circuit board from a computer, the boys are faced with the question of how to use the circuit board. Josh wants to make it work.

“How do I get electricity into it?”

The boys have suggestions:

“You need a plug.”

“Wire”

They already know something about the dangers of electricity.

They decide that what they are doing is risky work and that they need protection.

Josh: “Have you got a electricity helmet? Like firemen have?”

This triggers a discussion with the documenter about what is dangerous and what is not. Because it’s not connected, they decide that it is safe to go ahead.

“This is so cool.”

They use wire cutters and scissors to cut lengths of wire to attach to the circuit board. This demands a lot of strength and application. Not all the wire is suitable.

“I found a shower wire, a big wire!”

A door lock is added to the connection.

Luke tries to pick the lock with wire.

Josh, Megan and Thomas are working together on the wire.

“We’re making electricity. We’re going to put loads of wire in here.”

“Let’s get working.”

Megan is using all her strength to master the skill of wire cutting.

“We’re doing something really dangerous!”

Luke continues to cut the wire, fitting pieces into the holes in the circuit board. He says:

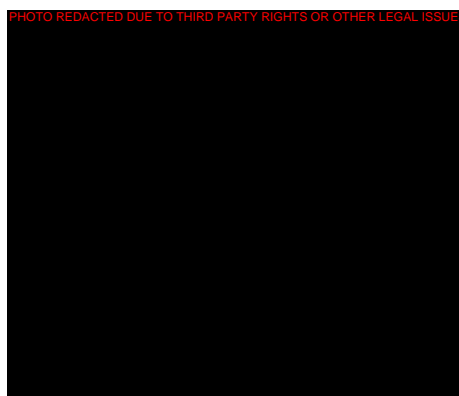
“Is it safe? Will it go on fire?”

The adult reassures him that as there is no connection to a power source, there is no danger.

The group work on, adapting the structure. With enough wires in place Luke has an idea about how to start their imaginary electricity maker.

“I want the key to start it.”

Thomas finds a key, and the electricity maker is finished.





## Effective practice

Practitioners who:

- value the contributions boys make, thereby building their sense of achievement and self-esteem;
- start from children's strengths, interests and learning preferences by observing, listening and tuning in to each child as an individual;
- support each child to try new activities by involving them in the planning so that their interests and concerns are addressed;
- do not stereotype boys and girls into specific gender roles and identities;
- validate the children's self-chosen activities by involving them in documenting what they have done through scribing what they say and taking photographs;
- when children exclude each other on grounds of gender, support the excluded child but also address these issues with all the children. Practitioners can help the children to challenge stereotypes themselves by discussing the children's views with them, using Persona Dolls (see further reading section) and stories;
- invite adults into the setting to talk with the children about their work, especially when this may challenge children's ideas about what is appropriate work for males and females (woman fire fighter or builder or male nurse for example).

## Challenges and dilemmas

- Allowing time and space with enough support from practitioners for every child to explore and develop in their own unique ways.
- Working as part of a team to support boys and girls when practitioners within the setting have different views on what is appropriate for boys and girls.
- Guarding against stereotyping by ensuring practitioners, parents and the children are aware of the negative effects it can have on children's attitudes and dispositions.

## Reflecting on practice

- Are practitioners aware of the choices boys and girls make? Observe how boys and girls use your environment, then take action in the light of your findings to ensure it is as inviting to boys as to girls and equally supported by practitioners.
- Are resources and displays full of positive images that do not stereotype along gender lines? Are resources accessible in such a way that boys and girls are likely to use them?
- In your setting, are boys' and girls' choices of play equally valued, so that boys' strengths, interests and learning preferences are recognised, respected and celebrated as starting points in their learning?
- Hold discussions with staff, parents and children about their views on gender and how best to ensure inclusive practice.



## Positive Relationships

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**EYFS Principle: Children learn to be strong and independent from a base of loving and secure relationships with parents and/or a key person.**

**2.1 Respecting Each Other:** Every interaction is based on caring professional relationships and respectful acknowledgement of the feelings of children and their families.

**2.2 Parents as Partners:** Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's development and learning.

**2.3 Supporting Learning:** Warm, trusting relationships with knowledgeable adults support children's learning more effectively than any amount of resources.

**2.4 Key Person:** A key person has special responsibilities for working with a small number of children, giving them the reassurance to feel safe and cared for and building relationships with their parents.

This EYFS principle focuses on the importance to children's learning and development of positive relationships and an ethos of mutual respect and trust. *"Babies and children are sociable and curious and they explore the world through relationships with others and through all their senses."* (EYFS card 1.1 *A Unique Child*) The quality of these relationships is critical: positive, close and loving relationships are important in providing a secure base for a child to flourish.

A close partnership with parents and families is essential in improving outcomes for boys. Parents know their children best and can help practitioners get to know them better. As practitioners and parents see children in different contexts, it is really important that both perspectives are fully shared to build a holistic picture of each child's learning and development. Informed by this deeper understanding, experiences can be planned that offer appropriate levels of inspiration, challenge and support. Close, respectful relationships between parents and practitioners will also help to provide continuity for young children by building a bridge between home and school. Open communication and shared expectations will lead to a more coherent approach. This will help boys to build confidence in themselves as learners in the knowledge that their efforts, achievements and contributions are valued.

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### Case study: Rushane's learning diary

In Bristol and other LAs, practitioners are developing their use of learning diaries to celebrate and value children's learning journeys 'making learning visible'. To build a full picture of each child's early learning and development, this record embraces the perspective of practitioners, parents, carers and the children themselves.

The diaries contain observations, learning stories and photographic evidence, as well as examples of the children's creative processes. This enables children's strengths and interests to be celebrated and used as starting points for the next steps in their learning journey. In this way children come to recognise themselves as competent and capable learners and, importantly, so do their families. Positive relationships are created and children's self-worth is affirmed.

This extract, taken from Rushane's diary in the reception year, illustrates the insights and sensitivities gained and shared by Rushane's mother, his practitioner and Rushane himself. Through this process they have been able to build a relationship rooted in trust and mutual respect. This positive relationship reinforces the powerful messages that Rushane is receiving about himself as a learner, supporting his growing confidence and self-esteem.

Many Foundation Stage settings in the LA are developing their use of learning diaries to support continuity in the transition from nursery to reception. Rushane's mother completed the Parent's Voice section in his first few days in reception and again towards the end of the year. The practitioners' comments in the Family Discussion section relate to settling in and highlight his interest in developing positive relationships with his peers. The full diary is one of the web case studies at [www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/casestudies/](http://www.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/casestudies/)

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## Family Discussion

*(This particular family discussion was 6 weeks after starting in reception)*

**Child's comment:**

"There is too much school. I like going to my dad's place and my mum's place. My friends are Lily and Kemar. I see Lily in the street.

I like mobilo. I make houses and cars. When I play football I keep falling over.

**Parent/carer's comments:**

I feel Rushane has settled in very well. He always come home and talk about his day. Also who he played with.

**Practitioner's comments:**

Rushane has many strategies for learning. For example he gets his name and copies it. He also supports others in their learning. He notices when another child doesn't have any fruit for instance and shares his with them. He is very aware of the rules and boundaries and ensures everyone else is too. He gets deeply involved in what he is doing.

**Next steps:** To continue to be interested and support others, taking other children's ideas into consideration when planning

**Date:** 18/10/06

## THE CHILD'S VOICE

**NAME:** Rushane

**DATE:**

**OBSERVER:** Kate Peel/Dipika Khimji

Strands in the curriculum	Decision points and examples of cues in the learning story	A LEARNING STORY
BELONGING	<b>TAKING AN INTEREST</b>	<p><b>January 2007</b> I've learnt letters. I learn numbers a long time ago. I know 'c' and 'b' I can write my name all by my own. Teaching is hard.</p>
WELL-BEING	<b>BEING INVOLVED</b>	<p><b>June 2007</b> I am learning how to read properly. I couldn't do a lot of sharing before but now I am good at sharing. I can also use the scissors properly. I am learning how to write words like c-a-t. I like going in the writing area. I like playing on the scooters best.</p> <p><b>What do you like learning most?</b> Reading books.</p> <p><b>What are your favourite?</b> Animals.</p> <p><b>How have you learnt to read?</b> 'The teachers help you. They sound out words. They give you things to take home. You look at them and read them. I am learning to write letters. I can only read a bit.</p> <p><b>What do you think you might need to learn next to help you read?</b> 'To sound out words.'</p>
EXPLORATION	<b>PERSISTING WITH DIFFICULTY</b>	<p>I want to learn a bit more numbers. My friends are Kemar, Malachi, Enzo and D'Andre. We play football in the Parry.</p> <p><b>Do you like working together?</b> Yes, you need to help and share. Sharing the till and the numbers.</p>
COMMUNICATION	<b>EXPRESSING AN IDEA OR A FEELING</b>	
CONTRIBUTION	<b>TAKING RESPONSIBILITY</b>	



<b>THE PARENTS' VOICE</b>		
<b>JULY 2007</b>		
<b>Belonging</b>	<b>Taking an interest</b>	Rushane and I have just been on holiday. When we were on holiday. Rushane picked a postcard which he wanted to send to a friend at school. The postcard didn't arrive until we got back but the class had a topic on writing postcards. They read Rushane's postcard. This made him feel real proud and confident about writing his own postcard.
<b>Well-being</b>	<b>Being involved</b>	Rushane has settled into school really well. He has made lot of different friends he often come home to tell me about who he has played with and what they have done. Not only does he talk about different children in different year he seem to have made a few friends in year 1. He also has been chosen to show the new children around the school on their visit.
<b>Exploration</b>	<b>Persisting with difficulty</b>	Rushane really enjoy exploring almost everything and enjoys and talk about new task - e.g. planting flowers. Sometime he may get a bit stuck when attempting to do something new this often get him quite frustrated and sometime he may want to give up but with a bit of adult attention and encouragement he will carry on. Since he has started school I have noticed that he gets less frustrated if he gets stuck and will now ask for help.
<b>Communication</b>	<b>Expressing an idea or a feeling</b>	Rushane enjoy counting and saving his pocket money in his room, so I have to ask him if I want to borrow some. He enjoy spending his money at the school fair or cake sale. He really enjoy making his own song. When I am singing he will say "You get into trouble if you sing someone else's song". He is very confident when it comes to talking he will talk to anyone even if he just meet them for the first time. He like tell people what's right and what's wrong.
<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Taking responsibility</b>	He has a few of his own responsibility like keeping his room tidy. It also his job to make sure he changes his story book every day for his bed time story. He often says "I wasn't very good at... but Kemar help me." He started riding a two wheel bike at about 3 1/2 because Kemar could do it so Rushane had to do it.

For more information about learning stories and the format used here, see Carr, M. (2001) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories, Effective Early Learning*.



## Effective practice

Practitioners who:

- find out how boys play at home and offer similar play opportunities in the setting as a starting point;
- respect and value every child's family and home background, their cultures and communities and the important events in their lives;
- work closely with parents and families, developing mutual understanding of how boys and girls play and the importance of building on children's interests;
- have the confidence to work flexibly, responding to the children within an ethos of respect;
- build trusting relationships with the boys and help them to build positive relationships with others, playing alongside children who may find it difficult to join in;
- invite fathers in, enabling them to join in and act as positive role models to the boys, involving them in a wide range of activities, particularly those which boys tend to avoid;
- document children's learning so that it can be shared with the child and other children, parents, practitioners and other professionals. Keep learning diaries involving parents and children like the one described above.

## Challenges and dilemmas

- Working with parents who have different views from the setting about how boys and girls should play.
- Developing the self-confidence to trust and respect the children and enable them to express themselves.
- Valuing the play of all the children, even those who tend to play noisily or base their play on themes with which you are unfamiliar.

## Reflecting on practice

- Do all practitioners feel they know all the boys in their key group of children as well as they know the girls? What can be done to improve this?
- Evaluate the developing relationships in your setting between practitioners and the parents of boys in particular. If practitioners do not spend as much time with some boys who have more action-orientated learning preferences, is the relationship with the child's parents less strong? If so, what can be done to improve this?
- Do practitioners and families value the choices that boys make – for example learning out of doors and in the construction area – as choices that help them to learn and develop in all aspects of learning?
- How do you encourage men to work in the early years? Do you, for example, discuss this with other colleagues from other settings, including male practitioners and fathers?





## Enabling Environments

**Principle: The environment plays a key role in supporting and extending children's development and learning.**

**3.1 Observation, Assessment and Planning:** Babies and children are individuals first, each with a unique profile of abilities. Schedules and routines should flow with the child's needs. All planning starts with observing children in order to understand and consider their current interests, development and learning.

**3.2 Supporting Every Child:** The environment supports every child's learning through planned experiences and activities that are challenging but achievable.

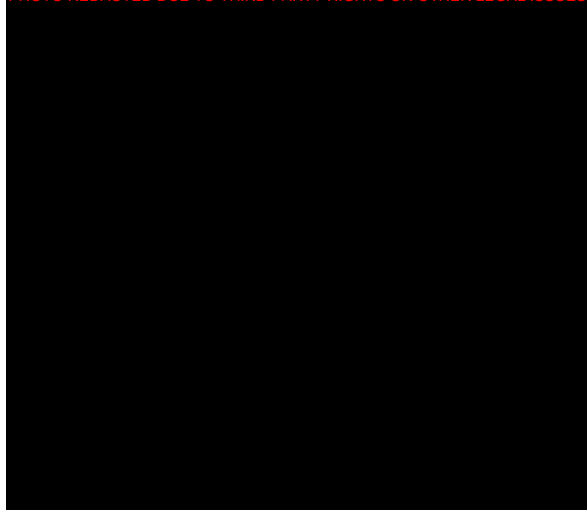
**3.3 The Learning Environment:** A rich and varied environment supports children's learning and development. It gives them confidence to explore and learn in secure and safe, yet challenging, indoor and outdoor spaces.

**3.4 The Wider Context:** Working in partnership with other settings, other professionals and with individuals and groups in the community supports children's development and progress towards the outcomes of *Every Child Matters*: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic well-being.

The types of play that boys and girls engage in is enhanced or diminished by the quality of the learning environment inside and out. The EYFS card, *Supporting Every Child*, flags up that: "*Children need sensitive, knowledgeable adults who know when and how to engage their interests and how to offer support at different times.*" (card 3.2) Practitioners must take responsibility for ensuring the learning environment is planned to inspire, challenge and intrigue every child. However, sometimes practitioners find the chosen play of boys more difficult to understand and value than that of girls. They may choose activities in which adults involve themselves least, or play that involves more action and a greater use of the available space, especially outdoors. "*Some boys who are at risk of becoming disaffected at a very young age have shown significant improvements if their learning takes place outside. Opportunities which reflect all six areas of learning outdoors must be available.*" (Bilton et al 2005.)

Images and ideas gleaned from the media are common starting points in boys' play and may involve characters with special powers or weapons. Adults can find this type of play particularly challenging and have a natural instinct to stop it. This is not necessary as long as practitioners help the boys to understand and respect the rights of other children and to take responsibility for the resources and environment. As the EYFS states: "*Value play which is based on characters, such as superheroes who may mean a lot to children, even if you do not appreciate them yourself!*" (EYFS card 4.3 *Learning and Development*) Creating situations so that boys' interests in these forms of play can be fostered through healthy and safe risk-taking will enhance every aspect of their learning and development.

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## Case studies: Superhero play

One of the web case studies linked to this guidance considers how to support boys' learning through their interests and choices of play, particularly superhero and weapon play. This booklet, produced by the London Borough of Islington Primary Strategy Early Years Team (2007), is entitled *Engaging boys in the early years, the experiences in three Islington settings*.

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### Asking for Spiderman's help

In the London Borough of Camden at the Thomas Coram Children's Centre, one of the staff noticed that the boys in her key group always chose to play in the garden and never tended to play in the home corner. Their key person, Kerry, noticed this and was well aware that they were involved in fantasy play about Spiderman. She observed that the storyline of their play was limited and tended to be repetitive. She also noticed that they would occasionally access the mark-making area, but never wanted to stay for long or engage deeply in these activities. Kerry suspected that these activities were not building on the boy's interests. She was aware that one of the older boys had shown a lot of interest in drawing when he was in the under threes part of the centre, but it was hard to get him to engage in this now.

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She asked the boys why they did not use any of the role-play areas for their play, especially the indoor ones. The boys told her that they liked playing Spiderman and it had to be played outside. Together Kerry and the boys transformed the indoor home corner area into a Spiderman House. They decorated it with their own representations of Spiderman's equipment and accoutrements, spider web patterns and signs – both written by them and scribed by staff. Some girls also joined in. Kerry found Spiderman books and comics and together they found downloadable pictures of

Spiderman on the Internet and printed these off to use as signs and icons on paper for drawing and writing on and also to create a story board. The boys' involvement in communicating through their representations and talk, ability to develop storylines in their play and their skills in drawing, reading and writing blossomed. The two drawings above were drawn at different times by one older and one younger child in the group. Their attention to detail can be seen in the characteristic Spiderman pose of the hands. They were both able to use their developing awareness of phonics to make some sound-letter correspondence in writing the word Spiderman.

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## Effective practice

Practitioners who:

- are aware of the impact of both the emotional and physical environment on the well-being and self-esteem of all children:
- involve themselves as much in the boys' choices of play and learning experiences as the girls';
- see the physical environment as one of the most powerful resources through which children can learn, and carefully plan and monitor how it is used;
- value the outdoor as much as the indoor environment, thinking creatively about the environment, experiences and activities they have on offer to ensure it meets the needs of boys as well as girls;
- are aware that sometimes an interest may be sparked by something immediate in the environment, such as a passing fire engine, or something much more long term, such as interest in superheroes;
- ensure role-play areas incorporate boys' play themes as in the case study above, allowing children to fetch and move resources from one place to another, to enhance their play themes;
- ensure all children take equal responsibility in caring for the environment of the setting, tidying up and looking after equipment and each other, fostering a sense of social responsibility.

## Challenges and dilemmas

- Ensuring the whole staff team agrees on a similar approach to valuing, respecting and working with boys in their play choices.
- Being aware of our own responses to boys when their play seems to be about fighting and power.
- Implementing changes which some staff may find contentious so that boys have access to a balanced range of experiences.

## Reflecting on practice

- How do the adults support the boys in your setting? Is there a consistent approach? Are all practitioners aware of when to get involved to support and develop the play and when to stand back?
- How does the environment support children's independent choices to follow up their own interests with and without adult support?
- How can you ensure that practitioners involve themselves equally in the play experiences of boys and girls, and engage boys in 'sustained shared thinking'?
- How do you ensure all adults working with your setting (including parents, family members, other professionals, students and so on) understand and make the best use of your carefully planned learning environment?



## Learning and Development

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**EYFS Principle: Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates and all areas of learning and development are equally important and inter-connected.**

**4.1 Play and Exploration:** Children’s play reflects their wide-ranging and varied interests and preoccupations. In their play children learn at their highest level. Play with peers is important for children’s development.

**4.2 Active Learning:** Children learn best through physical and mental challenges. Active learning involves other people, objects, ideas and events that engage and involve children for sustained periods.

**4.3 Creativity and Critical Thinking:** When children have opportunities to play with ideas in different situations and with a variety of resources, they discover connections and come to new and better understandings and ways of doing things. Adult support in this process enhances their ability to think critically and ask questions.

**4.4 Areas of Learning and Development:** The EYFS is made up of six areas of Learning and Development. All areas of Learning and Development are connected to one another and are equally important. All areas of Learning and Development are underpinned by the Principles of the EYFS.

The commitments linked to the principle of Learning and Development help us to understand how children learn actively through play, first-hand experiences, creativity and critical thinking. As children learn and develop, they “*actively build their own meanings by applying, revising and reapplying what they know.*” (EYFS card 4.2 *Active Learning in depth*) Boys often appear to be more active learners than girls, but whether or not there is a gender divide in this respect, active learners need opportunities to make their own decisions and have control over their learning to keep their interest and to develop their creativity.

The EYFS commitment and card on *Creativity and critical thinking* (card 4.3) looks in particular at how interaction between adults and children can support learning at its best. The card tells practitioners to:

- *Ensure that there is a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities” – so that boys and girls have time to explore and are supported in their expectations.*
- *“Provide opportunities for children to problem solve, make decisions and think critically.”*

If children’s thoughts and feelings are sought and valued and they are encouraged to decide for themselves how best to represent their ideas, they will come to see themselves as capable, competent, and creative learners.



### Case study: Visible thinking – extending communication and creativity

'Story Alive', funded by Creative Partnerships, has brought together artists and early childhood educators from Bristol, to reflect on children's developing language skills and their role in supporting early communication. Together they have explored children's experiences of story-telling and the power of non-verbal narratives. The practitioners have developed their skills in the performance of stories, using a minimum of props, a few musical instruments and no words at all. Following these creative encounters, the children were observed to capture the impact of the experience on their play, their developing thinking skills and communication. These observations have revealed 'extraordinary focus and absorption' from the children.

#### Documenting Oliver's learning story

Oliver showed great interest in the story sessions, often acting out and extending what he had seen. Through these sessions, the children had been introduced to the idea that musical sounds, usually used in the stories, have a written form. Oliver was watching one day as another child was shown how musical notes could be played from the marks the child had made on some music manuscript paper. He found some manuscript paper himself and began to make his own marks on it. Sarah, the musician working with the Centre, came to see what he was doing. What followed was a 15-minute learning event between Oliver and Sarah, with Sarah following Oliver's lead, providing him with her support, interest and involvement. Through this, Oliver began to grasp the concept that music could be written down and then played on a musical instrument. As Sarah said: "It was a joint experience which we both shared – one of those magical moments!"

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### Sarah's documentation

Oliver carefully made marks on the manuscript paper. As Sarah worked with Oliver, naming the marks he made, she realised he was really interested in this joint activity. She took Oliver to the marimba and, after giving him time to experiment with the sounds, she began to point to the notes that corresponded to his marks on the paper. As Sarah wrote in her observation notes:

"Each time he plays notes, I point them out and name them. This is helped by the letter names on the notes of the marimba."

As the episode continued, Oliver seemed to grasp the whole idea of composing, and Sarah wrote the notes down as he played. Oliver was very much in the lead, with Sarah taking her cues as to what to do next from him. Then he indicated to her that he wished to swap roles.

"Oliver hands me the beater, I give him the manuscript and he starts to draw some notes. He then points to the note I should play." He even corrected Sarah, showing her where 'C' was on the instrument.

At one point Oliver made marks outside the musical stave on the paper. To demonstrate the effect of this to Oliver, Sarah played imaginary notes off the end of the marimba. He loved this idea. He took over the beaters while Sarah wrote the notes. "Do it too low," he said, and played the imaginary note frantically.

This flow of thinking, with both adult and child deeply involved, continued for a few minutes more. Then he dropped the beater and left. "He goes off, running and jumping, sees a girl dancing on the carpet and begins to dance with her. He was too excited to be staying so still and needs to run and jump in his excitement."

The video footage of this sequence can be seen in the web materials.

The REPEY research (2002) and the EYFS call this sustained shared thinking. Sustained shared thinking happens most when practitioners are open to the children's ideas and willing to move with their flow of ideas and join in their explorations. As the EYFS card 4.3 *Learning and Development* states: "*In the most effective settings practitioners support and challenge children's thinking by getting involved in the thinking process with them. The adult shows genuine interest, offers encouragement, clarifies ideas and asks questions. This supports and extends the children's thinking and helps children to make connections in learning.*"

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## Effective practice

Practitioners who:

- ensure that the learning experiences offered to boys and girls supports their creativity and thinking;
- work *in partnership* with the child in a shared spirit of enquiry, joining in, but not taking over;
- actively listen, giving children the time they need to express themselves in different ways, responding to them, as in the example above;
- flow with children's thoughts and ideas so that they remain engaged in the learning experience and are motivated to continue;
- allow children to be spontaneous and make decisions about their own play activities, by having inspiring materials readily available;
- see every aspect and area of learning as interconnected and understanding that children's learning is seamless;
- monitor all children's progress regularly through discussing documentation and their learning diaries, sharing these with the child and parents and planning next steps that will engage and motivate them to continue to be interested and excited to learn.

## Challenges and dilemmas

- Striking a balance between child-initiated and adult-led activities as well as providing challenge and support to encourage boys to explore new possibilities.
- Providing opportunities for boys as well as girls to problem solve, make decisions and think critically, engaging them equally in experiences that promote 'sustained shared thinking'.
- Knowing when to engage and extend children's self-initiated play and thinking and when to stand back, observe and listen.

## Reflecting on practice

- How are boys' learning journeys reflected on and celebrated with the child, parents and peers?
- How do you ensure that the 'magical moments' or sustained shared thinking (as in the case study) happen as frequently as possible with every child?
- How do you plan provision that enables children to express their ideas in a variety of ways, for example through dance, music or role-play?
- How do you monitor children's progress in such a way that their learning is understood holistically?



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