

# Changes to the primary curriculum

A guide for parents  
and carers



department for  
children, schools and families

# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>What is the National Curriculum?</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>What's happening to lessons at primary schools in England?</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>So what will be taught in primary schools from 2011?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Areas of learning in the new primary curriculum</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>How did the review work?</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>More information</b>	<b>19</b>

# Introduction

We want to make this country the best place in the world for children to grow up. To achieve this, we need to make sure that every child has an excellent education; that they are safe and secure; and that they grow up as confident and happy young people.

This leaflet explains how the framework for what children learn at primary school – the primary curriculum – works. It explains some changes to primary education in England that will affect children in English state primary schools from September 2011.

The leaflet is for information only. If you have children who are at primary school now or who will be starting school soon, there is no need for you to take any action.

# What is the National Curriculum?

There has been a National Curriculum in England since 1988. The National Curriculum sets out the broad areas and common subjects that children in state schools in England learn.

Teachers in English state schools have to use the National Curriculum as a guide or framework, to make sure that they cover important subjects and that they have covered all the essential areas in their lessons.

The primary curriculum covers the broad areas of what children must learn at different stages at primary school. This means that parents and carers can be confident that children have learnt core knowledge and skills and have explored a wide range of topics, to prepare them to move up to secondary school.

The primary curriculum covers school Years 1–6. This is broken up into two parts: Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. Key Stage 1 covers Years 1 and 2, and ages 4 or 5 to 7. Key Stage 2 covers Years 3–6, or ages 8 to 11.

The National Curriculum does not tell teachers in what order they should teach subjects, nor how long to spend on different topics, nor how much homework to set. Teachers are free to use different kinds of books and materials in their lessons; the curriculum does not tell them which materials to use in their classrooms.

The primary curriculum does not give teachers detailed plans for their lessons, but it does spell out what kind of content needs to be included in each Key Stage. For example, all children need to have an understanding of the main events in British history, and need to study their times tables and long division. Young children need to use the phonics method – breaking down words into individual sounds – to help them learn to read. Teachers are trained professionals, who know their pupils and are best placed to decide the detailed content for each of their lessons.

Nor does the National Curriculum cover everything that children do at school. Schools are free to teach other subjects too: and children gain extra knowledge and learn skills which are not set out in the curriculum. They also read for pleasure, go on trips outside school, and take part in a wide range of other activities.

It is important to let all children learn at a pace that suits them, and the new primary curriculum encourages this approach. More detail in each subject – and more complicated work – will be introduced as teachers feel that children are ready and as their pupils progress through school.

# What's happening to lessons at primary schools in England?

The content of children's lessons needs to keep up to date with changes in the world. The world has changed dramatically in just 10 years and has been transformed in the last 50 years.

It has been 10 years since the last review of the framework for 5–11-year-olds – the national primary curriculum.

Society is changing fast. Jobs in new areas like computing and telecoms are growing, while older industries offer fewer opportunities. In 2000 there was a debate about climate change, but now it is accepted as a huge challenge that the world must respond to. The internet and other new technologies have revolutionised how we live and work.

We know that teachers have been doing great work, and primary school results reflect this. Now, around three-quarters of children leave primary school having achieved the right standard – or better – in English and maths. This compares to around half achieving that standard 10 years ago. This adds up to about 120,000 more children a year who are fluent in reading, writing, communicating and working with numbers.

In 2008 the Government set up a review of the primary curriculum. This review was led by Sir Jim Rose, a distinguished education expert. The review listened to the views of teachers, parents and the public,

and the team had help and advice from many other experts and specialists.

The purpose of the review was to make sure that what is taught in schools remains excellent, is based on the latest expert knowledge about how children learn, and is kept up to date in a changing world.

The review set out plans to change the curriculum. The public is being asked for views on the detail, and MPs will have to approve the plans by changing the law. If the plans are agreed, there will be a new National Curriculum in primary schools from September 2011.

A new curriculum has already been introduced for secondary schools.

# So what will be taught in primary schools from 2011?

The new curriculum in primary schools will affect the framework for how your child is taught if they are at primary school from 2011. You do not need to do anything – your child's school will put these changes into place.

The primary curriculum is being updated to meet future needs. An independent expert has recommended these changes, and the public, teachers and experts are being consulted on the final details.

There will be an even stronger focus on English, maths and ICT (information and communication technology). This includes more emphasis on encouraging children to develop their spoken English well and to apply maths in everyday situations, like counting and measuring.

There will also be a greater focus on schools encouraging personal development – to help children grow up happy and healthy. This will emphasise developing children's confidence, enhancing their ability to learn, and helping them to grow up to become responsible adults.

## **Six new areas of learning**

Subjects will be grouped into six new areas of learning – to help related subjects support each other. This will also make it easier for teachers to organise lessons spanning more than one subject. One example of this is improving the links between English and drama,



to help use drama to reinforce the teaching of English. The six areas of learning will **support** subjects; they will not replace them. The six areas of learning are:

- Mathematical understanding
- Historical, geographical and social understanding
- Understanding English, communication and languages
- Scientific and technological understanding
- Understanding the arts
- Understanding physical development, health and wellbeing.

Teachers will still teach separate subjects, such as maths, music and history, but they will also teach more 'cross-curricular' work – lessons and projects that combine more than one subject or skill. This can make lessons more interesting for children and help them use their knowledge in different situations. It will also give teachers more freedom to teach knowledge and skills in different ways, and make good use of their time. For example, a lesson on Charles Darwin could be used to teach history, geography and science. Techniques in maths could be taught at the same time as they are used in science projects. Learning about the body could be linked to cooking simple healthy meals. And learning about how a plant grows from a seed could help children to practise a range of skills, such as counting and writing, as well as learning about science.

For more detail on each area of learning, please see 'Areas of learning in the new primary curriculum' on page 10.

## What other changes are recommended?

Changes to the curriculum have considered not just what children will learn, but also how they develop in the years before primary school and where they need to go next.

Each child is an individual and develops at their own pace. The new curriculum will encourage more personal help for children as they move from pre-school to school. Children born in the summer will be able to start in reception during the September after they turn four – if their parents choose this option. This will reduce the gap between them and other children in the same school year who would otherwise spend longer in school.

Parents will be able to talk to their local school and local council to decide when it best suits their child to start primary school. For instance, the review recommends that young children who are born in the summer should be able to start part-time to begin with.

There will also be more help to ease the transition from primary to secondary school. Schools will share more information and work more closely to help children settle in when they start secondary education. Children in Year 6 will be able to do an extended piece of work, which secondary teachers will be able to look at alongside school reports and test results to get a better understanding of how pupils are progressing in their school work.

Teachers will have a choice about how they introduce some subjects in the middle years of primary school. The evidence from the independent review showed that this will make it easier for some children and that it will also help stretch the most able children. It will also help lay the groundwork for the new content covered in the secondary curriculum.

Primary schools are already encouraged to teach at least one modern foreign language, but will have to do this under the new curriculum. This will lead on well to language teaching in secondary school. Schools will also be able to introduce children briefly to other languages, as an extra aspect of their language teaching.

# Areas of learning in the new primary curriculum

The National Curriculum lays out broad areas of study, but it is up to teachers and heads how they organise the school day, what teaching materials to use and exactly what children learn in each lesson.

The summary below only picks out a few examples from each area of learning. For more details on the full curriculum, see <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/primarycurriculumreview/>

## Essential skills for learning and life

Certain essential skills run through each area of learning. These are:

- Literacy – which includes reading, writing, talking and listening
- Numeracy – which includes using numbers, using mathematical tools and representing information in charts and graphs
- Information and communication technology (ICT) – which includes using computers to find and share information and using technology to work together.

Other core skills which run through all the areas of learning are:

- Learning and thinking skills – which include investigating and looking for patterns
- Personal and emotional skills – which include working independently and setting goals

- Social skills – which include taking turns, sharing and understanding other people’s feelings.

## **The six areas of learning**

### **Mathematical understanding**

Mathematics helps children to make sense of the numbers, patterns and shapes they see in the world around them. It helps children to learn logical ways of thinking, which in turn helps them to apply problem-solving skills to other subjects. Children will learn to explore and explain their ideas using symbols, diagrams and spoken and written language. They will get a good grasp of the basics with numbers, including simple fractions, patterns and shapes, and will move on to learn to work out more complex problems in their heads, on paper and using ICT. They will develop a deeper understanding of maths through practical activities and by applying their knowledge to problems and situations from the real world. They will look at the different ways in which mathematics can be used to make sense of data and to help make decisions.

### **Historical, geographical and social understanding**

This area of learning stimulates curiosity about the world and where children fit within it. Children will learn about and be able to interpret the world around them – from their own local area to the global community. They will learn how the present has been shaped by the past, and about changes over time. As well as using maps and learning about important places, dates and people, they will look at the links between them, and explore why they are different.

Children will also look at important themes, such as the impact of transport and changing technology on society, poverty and the use of resources. They will become aware of how different communities live

and work together. As they get older, their growing understanding will help them make more sense of the world and prepare them to play an active role within it.

There are great opportunities for fieldwork, visiting museums, buildings, galleries and sites. Children will learn to use different kinds of information, such as documents, photographs and artefacts, as well as maps, weather data and online tools.

### **Understanding English, communication and languages**

Skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing are central to success in every subject and to better chances in life, both at home and abroad. Children will develop confident literacy skills, but will also learn about the power of communication, how language works, and how languages change. They will understand how language, literature and different media can fire the imagination, influence people and be used in different ways to express and share ideas. Encouraging children to read widely for pleasure from an early age is also essential.

At least one modern foreign language must be studied in primary school from age 7. The choice of language is decided locally, and will be dependent on which languages are taught at local secondary schools.

### **Scientific and technological understanding**

With the right support, children can become experts at exploring and understanding nature and the world around them. This area of learning supports this aim and shapes it into an appreciation of experimental methods and of testing new ideas properly. Children will explore different scientific instruments, carry out their own investigations and review others' results. The curriculum explores

recycling, different types of material and the history of science, as well as mathematical methods for analysing data.

The curriculum begins with activities such as describing everyday materials and how to manipulate them, as well as how to keep living things alive and healthy. In later years, different forces are investigated, how light and sound travel, and which processes are reversible and which not, as well as the functions of the human body and plant systems, including life cycles and reproduction.

As their understanding grows, children will gain awareness of the ways in which learning in science and design and technology inform other areas of learning, including historical, geographical and social understanding. This will help them to make informed choices about the way they want to live in and shape the natural and made worlds.

Children will carry out their own investigations, using their scientific knowledge and understanding to decide what kind of evidence to collect and what equipment and materials to use. They should suggest the results they expect and explain their observations and the significance and limitations of the conclusions they draw.

## **Understanding the arts**

This area of learning includes art, craft and design, dance, drama and music. It teaches children specific skills as well as how to use the arts to express their thoughts and feelings. Through the arts, children will also develop original ideas, explore issues and solve problems. Children will take part in different activities – from singing and composing their own music to photography and animation. In drama, they will create and take part in performances for each other, the school and the wider community. They will see live or recorded professional productions and work with musicians and performers.

The arts are all about developing and applying creativity and imagination. Design, dance, drawing, photography, drama, animation and music are all possible areas for teachers to explore, and they can all cut across to other subjects in exciting ways.

Drama is a great example. It is a powerful arts subject that also enhances children's language development through role play in the early years. Theatrical work can enrich historical and religious studies as well as personal development and can help to build children's confidence.

The arts provide a wealth of vital experience to excite children's imaginations and develop their creativity. This area of learning encourages them to participate actively, to try out different possibilities, and to communicate meaning to different audiences through a variety of media and contexts.

Children will discover the value of focus, discipline and practice and the importance of working together on shared projects.

Taking part in the different arts themselves and experiencing a range of art forms will help children to develop an aesthetic sense, and will also help them to understand different viewpoints, identities and cultures.

### **Understanding physical development, health and wellbeing**

This area of learning covers a variety of skills, knowledge and attitudes that help children to lead happy and healthy lives, as well as team and individual sports. Indoor and outdoor activities should include working as a team, as well as outwitting opponents and winning competitions. There should be at least five hours a week of sport and activity.



Children will learn about their changing bodies and the importance of nutrition and rest, helping them make informed choices and lead healthy, balanced lifestyles.

Through team and individual sports, games and enjoyable physical activities, they will learn to increase body control, coordination and dexterity. They will learn to reflect on and evaluate their own performance, and see the links between how their bodies work and healthy lifestyles.

Children will learn about their responsibilities both as individuals and members of groups, and about what is right and wrong. They will learn to compete fairly and to cooperate as individuals and in groups and teams, understanding their own and others' roles.

Children will learn how to recognise and control feelings and emotions. They will explore why people work and the different jobs they do, and start to learn about managing money.

In later years, sensible attitudes towards alcohol, relationships and balanced lifestyles will be explored.

To enjoy healthy, active and fulfilling lives, children must learn to respond positively to challenges, to recognise and manage risk and to develop their self-confidence and physical capabilities. Such learning lays the foundations for long-term wellbeing and contributes to children's mental, social, emotional, economic and physical development.

## Subjects where different rules apply

### Sex and relationship education

As with secondary school, parents are able to withdraw their children from certain aspects of the curriculum, specifically some parts of sex and relationship education, which are covered in the 'Understanding physical development, health and wellbeing' area of learning. Any parent who is concerned should first discuss this with their school. If a parent eventually chooses to withdraw a child from certain lessons, parents then have a responsibility for making sure that their child continues to develop and understand these important issues.

### Religious education

There are local programmes of study for religious education, which are agreed in each area by the local authority with help from schools, faith groups and others. Suggested content and guidance is available in the National Curriculum for primary schools as well as for secondary schools, but schools do not have to use this content. Parents can also discuss how religion is taught with the school and can choose to withdraw their child from all or particular aspects of religious education.

## How did the review work?

The independent review was led by a team working for an independent expert, Sir Jim Rose, and it considered a wide range of views from parents and teachers.

The review team spent several months gathering evidence. They drew on the views of over 1,000 parents and nearly 2,000 teachers. In addition, they took into account the views of 5,000 primary pupils.

The team visited 57 nursery, primary and secondary schools and compared primary schools in England with those in 20 countries in Europe, Asia and around the world.

They also looked at the latest research into how children move from pre-school to primary school and from primary to secondary school, and the latest studies into how children learn to read and write.

Throughout this process, as well as talking to experts, the review team have examined surveys to make sure that their aims and key findings are supported by teachers and parents. This has been an important way of making sure that the review is useful and on track. For instance, in late 2008, 97 per cent of primary teachers agreed that change was necessary and that the aims of the review would provide a strong foundation for the design of the new curriculum. The review has responded to evidence from teachers that the previous curriculum was too prescribed. The new curriculum will have much

more flexibility so that teachers can better tailor lessons for individual children and classes.

Among teachers, 76 per cent wanted a general balance between subject-based teaching and links between subjects.

Heads and senior leaders in primary schools, with their cross-cutting understanding of the issues facing their teachers and pupils agreed even more than classroom teachers with the six proposed areas of learning and the need to build consistency between different stages of education.

Among parents, nearly all agreed that the six areas of learning would help children develop essential life skills, with a real emphasis on reading, writing, maths and learning to respect each other and be healthy. Many felt that learning about teamwork and information technology at primary school were as important as English and maths, all of which are strongly emphasised in the new curriculum.

## More information

For more details of the review and the new curriculum please see <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/primarycurriculumreview/> and [www.qca.org.uk/curriculumconsultation](http://www.qca.org.uk/curriculumconsultation)



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