

Learning together through play in the early years: St John Vianney Primary School Childcare

URN: EY234239

Region: North East, Yorkshire and Humber

Remit: Early years

Provider background

St John Vianney Primary School Childcare, in Hartlepool, is a fully integrated setting that merges early learning and care for children from birth to four years. It caters for a mix of children, including fee-paying learning and care, funded early years provision and funded care from birth. It operates flexibly, providing sessions for children under three years, as well as hourly learning and care for children in funded provision.

Brief description

This good practice example shows how St John Vianney Primary School Childcare has created a powerful, professional hub that places children and their parents at the centre of all it does.

This kind of collaboration goes beyond a group of children and adults occupying the same building. There is a shared belief that children learn best when they engage in learning that matters to them, when learning is contextualised in meaningful ways and when they have a sense of ownership of their own learning. Learning is not delivered here; it is built, over time, through play, which encourages exploration, active learning and critical thinking and supports a true partnership with parents.

This is part of a set of eight good practice examples showcasing good practice in early years to support the report: [‘Teaching and play in the early years – a balancing act?’](#).

The good practice in detail

Staff at St John Vianney Primary School Childcare believe that play is integral to children's development and that 'teaching in the early years is play, the two cannot be separated and to do so would be to create a false dichotomy'.

This ethos pervades through early years practice at St John Vianney childcare. Play is the vehicle by which children journey through their time in early years. The purpose of this approach is to show children and their parents that they can learn from everything they do – a valuable lesson that will stand children in good stead for the rest of their lives.

The majority of children join the school's early years provision without the skills and abilities to play, share toys or make friends. Many have spent most of their time at home with parents or carers and had limited opportunities to play or socialise with other children. Some parents do not actually know how to play with their children or do not fully understand the importance of play to their child's development.

The staff teach both children and their parents the art of play. They ensure that this happens effectively and from the earliest point possible.

Learning to play: children

Play underpins all areas of development including communication, social skills, problem solving and imaginative thinking.

To support children in learning to play, staff follow three simple steps:

- Parents and children visit the setting before they start. During this visit, experienced practitioners carry out joint observations of the children with the parents, who are also encouraged to share their observations from home. This helps to provide an **accurate baseline assessment** of the child's learning and interests. This step is crucial. With this accurate picture of the skills and abilities of individual children, staff can plan effectively for the next steps in the child's learning.
- A lot of thought and time goes into matching children to a **key person**. Consideration is given to the child's age, the information from their baseline assessment and the child's voice. The key question in making this decision is 'do I know enough about the child so that I can challenge them to make leaps in their learning?' To be effective, the key person must challenge children to move forward. Where children do not have the skills to play, it is the key person who models how to play and supports children to share and interact with others around them.
- Practitioners then **observe and track children's learning** to ensure that they are making progress and that practice reflects what the children need. This enables staff to identify where more focus is needed and to plan timely intervention where children's learning or progression are seen to dip. This

might involve additional direction, reinforcement of prior learning, partnerships with other agencies such as enhanced speech and language therapy and/or specific programmes.

Learning to play: parents

Staff know it is not enough just to model play and target interventions to support children's play. They recognise that they need to teach parents how to play too. This helps children to continue to play and learn even when they are not at the setting.

The first thing that staff do is to explain to parents why play is so important and how it supports their child's development. There are several ways in which staff engage with parents.

- Through pilot **home visits**, staff gain a deeper understanding of where children's learning starts from and how they might better support parents to understand why their child needs to play. From these visits, staff have realised that they cannot assume any parent, no matter how involved, actually knows or fully understands how to play with their child. To help them, staff provide a range of parent support workshops and family learning sessions.
- At the weekly **pre-nursery group**, offered to children and parents just before the child's third birthday, children and parents get time to play together alongside practitioners. This enables the setting's skilled practitioners to model play and to talk about its importance to parents. Staff explain how they are using play to support specific aspects of a child's learning, for example through modelling new vocabulary or encouraging children to 'have a go' themselves. Parents also have the opportunity to play with their child themselves, empowering them with the confidence that they can do this themselves at home without the support of the practitioners. Staff provide advice and guidance as required, but find that the need for this reduces as parents become more confident.
- Parents are given lots of ideas and **resources to try at home**. Staff will ask parents how they got on and talk to them about any improvements they have seen in their child's learning as a result of the support they have been given at home.
- **Individual learning journals** record significant moments in learning. Importantly, they not only capture *what* is learnt but *how* things are learnt. Some concepts aren't easy for children to grasp and the journey to that point is as important as the learning achieved. The key person involves the child's parents and other carers to share their experiences of the child's learning away from the setting to help build up a picture of the whole child. This helps to reinforce to parents the importance of their role as teachers at home. It is particularly helpful where children and their parents speak English as an additional language, since it shows learning that takes place when language is not a barrier.

Learning to play: as soon as possible

The long-term benefits of two-year-olds accessing high quality early years provision at an earlier stage cannot be underestimated. As increasing numbers of two-year-olds now take up their free entitlement, leaders can see the long-term benefits of admitting some of the most vulnerable two-year-olds in their community.

The opportunity for children to attend the setting from the age of two years has three distinct advantages.

- The children benefit from high quality teaching and play from an earlier age. This ensures that they make rapid progress in their learning and catch up with their peers. Staff have already noticed that, where children have attended the two-year-old provision, they are much more settled and ready to learn when they transfer into nursery. In addition, staff are better able to meet their specific needs, as they have a good understanding of their learning journey to that point.
- Staff can identify at an earlier stage where some children might need additional intervention. They focus on two prime areas in particular: communication and language, and personal, social and emotional development. This is because children often arrive at the setting needing additional support to enable them to gain the skills and abilities in these areas that are expected for children of that age.
- Staff can work with and support parents at a much earlier stage.

Learning to play together: a seamless transition

As children progress through the early years, the balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities shifts from being based mainly on the child's interests to a more adult-led approach where specific skills are taught, practised and mastered.

A rich learning environment, both indoors and out, offers children a broad and balanced range of activities. During their play children apply their learning. To promote maturity and self-regulation, older children are set tasks to complete during their time away from adults. This enables the children to put into practice some of their newly learnt skills and allows practitioners to gauge the depth of their growing understanding. Children also move between different rooms to try out activities appropriate to their age and stage of development.

Staff encourage collaborative play between older and younger children. In this way, older children support the learning of younger children.

For those children who attend flexibly, a tailored programme ensures that they not only have access to a broad and balanced curriculum, but also benefit from adult-directed learning. A specially appointed member of staff ensures that those children who attend at different times are able to catch up with some of the core activities

they have missed. This wraparound provision enables all children to have access to the full curriculum, regardless of their attendance patterns.

The setting has had to be innovative in its approach to children's transition from the two-year-old room into pre-school. There are not always sufficient places in the Nursery class to cater for all the two-year-olds wanting to take up a place. To address this, three-year-olds are provided for within the two-year-old room until a place becomes available. This minimises the disruption to the children and ensures that all continue to make good and better progress.

The key strength of this setting is the combination of an inspirational headteacher and a staff team who all work extremely efficiently together within clear principles. The headteacher has a clear vision of the role of the school in serving every child, together with their family. [She/he] works consistently and imaginatively to keep making the school a better place for learning. In the words of the headteacher: 'Yes this is a great start, but let's improve on that, let's challenge staff, children and their parents and continue to move them all forward.'

The good practice case studies that Ofsted publishes highlight specific examples of practice that providers of education, learning and children's services have used to achieve successful outcomes.

For education, the case studies do not recommend a single particular approach to teaching and learning. Ofsted has no preferred lesson structure or teaching style. We showcase and share a wide range of approaches that providers have found work well for them in achieving good outcomes for children, young people and learners.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Complete our survey [here](#).

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