



**Guidance  
by the sector,  
for the sector**

# Overview – Characteristics of Effective Learning, and Areas of Learning and Development

**The Characteristics of Effective Learning and the Prime and Specific Areas of Learning and Development are all inter-connected.** Different elements of learning are identified in the EYFS, to make the complex picture of learning clearer. But children’s learning is not compartmentalised and many or all of these elements are in action at the same time as children interact with people and things.

Characteristics of Effective Learning	Areas of Learning and Development	Birth to 5 Matters Aspects																								
<p><b>Playing and Exploring</b></p> <p><b>ENGAGEMENT</b> Finding out and exploring Playing with what they know Being willing to ‘have a go’</p> <p><b>Active Learning</b></p> <p><b>MOTIVATION</b> Being involved and concentrating Keep trying Enjoying achieving what they set out to do</p> <p><b>Creative and Critical Thinking</b></p> <p><b>THINKING</b> Having their own ideas Making links Working with ideas</p>	<p><b>Prime Areas</b></p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td rowspan="3">Personal, Social and Emotional Development</td> <td>Making Relationships</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Sense of Self</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Understanding Feelings</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Physical Development</td> <td>Moving and handling</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>Health and Self-care</td> </tr> <tr> <td rowspan="3">Communication and Language</td> <td>Listening and Attention</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Understanding</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Speaking</td> </tr> </table> <p><b>Specific Areas</b></p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td rowspan="2">Literacy</td> <td>Reading</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Writing</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Mathematics</td> <td>Mathematics</td> </tr> <tr> <td rowspan="3">Understanding the World</td> <td>People and Communities</td> </tr> <tr> <td>The World</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Technology</td> </tr> <tr> <td rowspan="2">Expressive Arts and Design</td> <td>Creating with Materials</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Being Imaginative and Expressive</td> </tr> </table>	Personal, Social and Emotional Development	Making Relationships	Sense of Self	Understanding Feelings	Physical Development	Moving and handling		Health and Self-care	Communication and Language	Listening and Attention	Understanding	Speaking	Literacy	Reading	Writing	Mathematics	Mathematics	Understanding the World	People and Communities	The World	Technology	Expressive Arts and Design	Creating with Materials	Being Imaginative and Expressive	
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**The Characteristics of Effective Learning describe behaviours children use in order to learn.** To learn well, children must approach opportunities with curiosity, energy and enthusiasm. Effective learning must be meaningful to a child, so that they are able to use what they have learned and apply it in new situations. These abilities and attitudes of strong learners will support them to learn well and make good progress in all the Areas of Learning and Development.

**The Areas of Learning and Development affect each other.** For example, developing communication and language will support children to understand and explain mathematical ideas. Developing physical skills will allow children to be more active explorers and so enhance their progress in Understanding the World. The more concepts they develop within Understanding the World, the more they will be able to relate to what they find in books and so support their development in Literacy. Experiences and activities that relate to Areas of Learning and Development, when they offer children opportunities to have autonomy and develop their own ideas, can also provide the contexts for children to practise their learning behaviours, and so reinforce the Characteristics of Effective Learning.

**Prime areas of development and learning lay vital foundations in the early years.** The three Prime areas, **Personal, social and emotional development (PSED), Communication and language (CL), and Physical development (PD)**, describe universal core aspects of early child development. They are time-sensitive because of biological factors that enable rapid brain connections, particularly in the first three years of life but continuing throughout early childhood. Developmental steps missed at this early crucial stage are much harder to address later on, so it is crucial that children's interactions and experiences in the first few years support development in these fundamental areas.

All three Prime areas are always in action for a young child. In every activity, the child is experiencing feelings and developing a sense of self and others, is physically engaged through their senses and movements, and is learning to understand and communicate with others. It is through these aspects that a child accesses the world around them and relationships with other people, which in turn opens the door to learning in all areas. The Prime areas therefore strongly influence learning in the Specific areas of learning and development.

Development in each of the Prime areas affect the others: as babies and children develop their sensory abilities and movement, they can perceive and engage with others, and so develop in PSED. Engaging with others spurs more physical activity, and is the beginning of communication and language, which in turn helps build relationships, understanding of feelings and learning about health and physical wellbeing.

While the Prime areas are especially crucial to early years provision during the first three years, they remain centrally important for children's development and learning throughout the EYFS and beyond, and should receive priority attention to ensure strong foundations in development and learning.

[\*\*Rationale for Characteristics of Effective Learning, Tickell Review\*\*](#)

[\*\*Rationale for Prime and Specific Areas of Learning and Development, Tickell Review\*\*](#)

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