



Key messages

- Babies and young children learn by actively investigating the world around them and through social activity with people.
- Children's interactions enable them to construct ideas and create a framework for thinking and learning that helps them to develop as learners.
- When children are actively involved in learning they are developing the mental structures that help them to think and move on; these are sometimes referred to as schemas (Athey, 1990).
- Practitioners contribute to children's active learning by creating the climate and conditions to promote their involvement.
- Making decisions is important in children's learning, putting them in control and enabling them to match their play to what they want to achieve.
- Children develop autonomy as learners by making and following through their decisions about their learning.
- Engaging children in active learning depends on understanding and building on what each child is familiar with, knows and can do.
- The range of activities available should enable all children to find something that is relevant to engage and sustain their interest.
- Good working relationships with parents help practitioners to provide inviting contexts that children recognise and can learn from.

What Active Learning means

Babies and young children learn to make sense of their world by actively investigating what it contains and through social activity with significant people. Being an active learner goes beyond observable physical actions. Children's interactions with their environment lead to mental actions through which they construct ideas about what they are encountering. As they come across objects, situations, people and ideas, they adjust and structure their knowledge by trying to make sense of their experiences. They actively build their own meanings by applying, revising and reapplying what they know. In this way they learn about the many facets of their environment. More importantly, they are creating a framework for thinking and learning that will help them to develop as learners.

Why Active Learning is important

Mental and physical involvement

Babies and young children are born with a deep interest in people and with a drive to find out about their world. Their search for meaning is an active process as they seek to understand how people behave and communicate, how objects work and what can be done with them, and how space can

be used. When children are actively involved in learning they are creating the mental structures that help them to think and move on. This is an exciting process that motivates them to solve problems and sustain their efforts, until they are satisfied that they understand what things mean and what they can do.

The mental actions that babies and young children develop are sometimes referred to as schemas. Athey defines a schema as 'a pattern of repeatable behaviour into which experiences are assimilated and gradually coordinated' (1990, p.37). These repeated patterns of actions and thinking will frame, structure and support children's learning. As they extend their experiences, constantly exploring, babies and young children make new discoveries and learn how to adjust and transform their schemas.

Children's direct experiences and interactions with the things and people around them are central to their learning. It is important that settings make the activities that they present as meaningful as possible. Practitioners make a huge contribution to children's active learning by creating the climate and conditions that best promote children's involvement. First and foremost this involves building children's self-esteem and confidence. Mental and physical involvement in learning is built on the confidence and trust that come from good relationships. When children are unsure of their surroundings they lack confidence and are tentative in their actions. When they trust that they are valued and accepted for who they are, they are at ease and sure of themselves. This enables them to seize opportunities to interact with people they know well, investigate the objects and spaces around them, be stimulated by challenges, take risks and tackle problems with enthusiasm.

Creating optimum conditions for active learning also involves understanding what learning looks like and creating the right contexts in which it can flourish. Early learning is active, interactive, messy, boisterous and often physical. Babies and young children explore their world through movement, using all their senses to find out what they can do, what things are like and what things mean. They build understanding and ideas from these early sensory experiences, they seek and benefit from adult support to furnish, sustain and extend their enquiries and are delighted when their accomplishments are recognised.

Decision making

Being able to make decisions is an important element in children's active learning because it ensures that learning is matched to what they want to do and achieve. Where choice is limited or where provision is inappropriate to their needs children are likely to be bored and lack enthusiasm. Babies and young children are quick to decide which activities they want or do not want to participate in but decision making is more than this. Making decisions enables children to be in control and independent. The beginning of independence in babies' learning is evident in their unwillingness to shift attention from a point of sustained interest. They appear to know what they want to find out and are keen to take charge of the agenda. As they develop they seem increasingly driven to control and manage their world. Making decisions also helps children to become managers of their own learning.

Children's developing autonomy as active learners is furthered as they make and follow through their decisions about their learning. Allowing children to decide what and how they are to do things increases their engagement. Promoting and facilitating children's decision making does not mean leaving children to their own devices, however. Practitioners can help children to extend the sphere and depth of their activity by creating situations for them to make decisions and supporting them as they follow these through. By encouraging and supporting their decisions, adults help children to have a good disposition to learning and to gain confidence in their ability to respond to challenges.

Personalised learning

Engaging children in active learning depends upon understanding and building on what each child is familiar with, knows and can do. Valuing and understanding children as individuals enables practitioners to make learning personally meaningful for each child. Getting to know children and their parents well will help practitioners to understand how to stimulate and sustain children's involvement and effort in learning.

During the Early Years Foundation Stage children's approaches to learning will vary enormously. While there are patterns of development and learning that most children follow, the pace and character of children's learning can differ from one child to another as children have different interests, skills and knowledge that they have built up from their experiences. This means that children can learn the same thing in different ways or learn the same thing at different times in their development. For example, one child may be excited by outdoor activities, another might prefer to spend a lot of time drawing and painting, another might learn very quickly and need lots of challenges for their involvement to be sustained. The range and character of activities provided should be planned to cater for these kinds of differences in ways that enable all children to find something that is relevant and that will engage and sustain their interest. Some children will need additional support to become fully involved in a range of planned activities.

Personalising learning, so that all children are involved, is in part dependent on how activities are presented. The context within which children experience things has a considerable effect upon their willingness to become involved and their ability to connect with the ideas that are presented. For children to be motivated to take part in an activity they need to be able to find some meaning in it and they will feel reassured that they know how to operate, when they understand the situation or circumstances in which they are to learn. When they find things that they already know about, and can latch on to, they have a base from which to explore something new. Good working relationships with parents give practitioners essential information about children's learning at home and this helps them to provide inviting contexts that children recognise, from which they can learn.

Effective practice in relation to Active Learning

Mental and physical involvement

- Promote active learning by planning play experiences that are based on children's real life experiences, such as a hospital or a building site.
- Be flexible and help to sustain children's endeavours by adjusting plans and routines, for example, by allowing children to return to an activity later.
- Enable children who need help with communication, language and literacy skills to become actively engaged in learning through well-planned sensory experiences. For example, by:
 - augmenting communication by using pictures, signs and symbols;
 - presenting visual and written material in large print formats or through audio tapes and computers;
 - using materials and resources that children can find out about through sight, touch, sound and smell.
- Make full use of outdoor space to extend children's learning as many practical experiences benefit from the freedom to move, be exuberant and play on a larger scale, that being outdoors brings.
- Play alongside children who are finding it difficult to join in and give additional support to assist their involvement when needed.

Decision making

- Encourage children to make decisions about what things they are to do and how, by having materials readily available and well-organised.

- Respect children's decisions and help them to extend the sphere and depth of their activity by planning activities that relate to their choices. For example, a child may frequently choose to play in the construction area. Provide a ramp for them to investigate the properties of solid shapes (Which shapes roll down the ramp? Which do not and why?), estimations of distance (which rolls furthest) and representation (marking the distance that each shape travels and comparing distances). Alternatively, put building tools and equipment in the sand play area to broaden the context and character of construction play.
- Observe individual children to monitor how they decide to use their time and the activities they choose or avoid. Use this information to deepen their learning through things they often choose to do and to widen their interest in other things.

Personalised learning

- Develop children's self-esteem, confidence and ability to learn by providing activities that build on what they already know. Base your expectations of what they can achieve on knowledge of what they can do and are beginning to learn in the setting and at home.
- Enable children with special needs to participate actively in learning by giving additional adult support, adapting activities, providing alternative activities or using specialist aids and equipment, when needed.
- Help children who are learning English as an additional language to take part in the range of activities provided by giving them opportunities to use their home language, as well as opportunities to speak and listen in English. This assists and helps to sustain their involvement by showing them their home language is valued and this contributes to their self-esteem and to their disposition to learn.
- Monitor children's progress to discover their achievements, identifying areas of concern, and then taking action to support them, for example, by using different approaches, additional help or help from other agencies.
- Create good working relationships with parents so that you understand children's individual needs and can pick up particular difficulties at an early stage.
- Promote confidence and a 'can do' approach to learning by helping children to engage in a range of activities and recognising their efforts and achievements. This is particularly important for children who have special needs or who are learning English as an additional language and who may feel excluded if they do not receive support when it is needed.

References

Athey, C. (1990) *Extending Thought in Young Children: a parent-teacher partnership*, Paul Chapman Publishing, London.

Further resources

David, T., Gooch, K., Powell, S. and Abbott, L. (2003) *Review of the Literature to Support Birth to Three Matters: a framework to support children in their earliest years*, DfES Publications, Nottingham (Research Report 444); available online from: www.surestart.gov.uk/_doc/0-99C16C.pdf