

# CONTEMPORARY CHILDHOOD

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# 1

# THE CHANGING NATURE OF CHILDHOOD

## Why you should read this chapter

To properly understand childhood in the twenty-first century, we need to examine changing perspectives of childhood and explore the changing nature of families. We must also examine the shifting nature of cultures and the impact of inclusion. In addition, we must examine the nature of emerging curricula and current and proposed initiatives such as the new Statutory Framework for Early Years, all of which impact hugely on the work of practitioners and the lives of children today.

By the end of this chapter you should:

- have a clear understanding of key issues underpinning the changing nature of childhood
- have knowledge of the relevance of multiculturalism on the changing landscape of childhood
- be aware of some examples of best practice when working with families
- have explored issues relating to children with additional needs
- have examined the impact of poverty on the lives of children and the working patterns of parents and primary care givers
- explored the state of 'play' today, in the UK.

## SHIFTING LANDSCAPES: CHILDREN'S SECURITY

For many children living today, the realities of modern life can at best be challenging and at worst deeply distressing (Cawson, 2002; Colverd and Hodgkin, 2011; MacBlain, 2014). Childhood has become increasingly complex and continues to grow in its complexity. While most children grow up in stable environments that offer love and security and prepare them for adulthood, many do not. Cowie (2012, p. 2) commented as follows in relation to the UK:

Today's young people seem to face severe stresses that were unknown a generation ago. Suicidal thoughts are common among young people, as are feelings of hopelessness and futility ... There are disturbing statistics on the number of children and young people who run away from home or care ... These amount to around 100,000 episodes each year in the UK, with around a quarter running away before the age of 13, and one in ten running away before the age of ten.

Cowie has gone on to indicate how in 2012 the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) found itself dealing with some 30,000 cases, amounting to 0.25 per cent of the population. In a review undertaken by the NSPCC (Cuthbert et al., 2011), it was estimated that in 2010 some 19,500 infants under the age of 1 year in the UK were living in a home with a parent who was a user of Class A drugs, and that around 93,500 infants under the age of 1 year were living in a home with a parent who was a problem drinker. Such statistics are worrying and challenge the often popularly expressed view in the media that childhood is a time characterised by freedom and fun, security and stability and a carefree existence with little, if any, responsibility.



### POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

Take time to view this excellent YouTube video clip of Sir Al Aynsley Green, entitled 'Should the Nurture of Children be Everybody's Business?', at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqYSS1nx0eA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqYSS1nx0eA), in which Sir Al makes the case for a new and more collective approach to securing the best prospects for all children in the UK today. Then consider the following:

How might practitioners in early years settings and primary schools work to develop environments where all children feel nurtured? What personal, as well as professional, qualities might practitioners need to do this effectively?

There are significant numbers of children growing up today who are forced to witness physical abuse in their homes, often as early as in their first months. It has been recognised (Walker et al., 2009), for example, that domestic violence accounts for around 14 per cent of all violent incidents in England and Wales. Elsewhere, it has been reported (Cawson, 2002) that 6 per cent of children receive maltreatment at the hands of their parents or carers, with 7 per cent of children experiencing serious physical abuse. An estimated 6 per cent of children have been the subject of serious absence of care throughout their childhood, with the same percentage of children experiencing frequent and severe emotional maltreatment (Colverd and Hodgkin, 2011). Many children, then, entering early years settings and primary schools will have already internalised models of behaviour from those whom they should be able to trust, that fall well short of what can be considered to be stable and nurturing. It is with these internalised models in place that children then commence their education and begin relating to those adults outside of the home who will then be largely responsible for their education and learning and their social and emotional development.

## MULTICULTURALISM

The nature and cultural make-up of many schools and early years settings and, therefore, the experiences of children have been changing dramatically over the past few years as many 'new arrivals' enter the education system across the UK. This has been exacerbated in more recent years and months by the repositioning across Europe of large numbers of migrants escaping conflict in the Middle East.

Prior to the Coalition Government in the UK coming to power in 2010, there were some 856,670 pupils learning English as an Additional Language (EAL) in England, representing 15.2 per cent of the primary school population and 11.1 per cent of the secondary school population in England, with an estimation of over 200 languages being spoken (DCSF, 2009). In inner London, it was further estimated at this time that 54.1 per cent of pupils were learning English as an additional language (DCSF, 2009). In 2012, the National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC, 2012) reported on its website how the results of the annual school census in January of that year had shown that:

one in six primary school pupils in England - 577,555 - do not have English as their first language. In secondary schools the figure stands at 417,765, just over one in eight. Once special schools and pupil referral units are taken into account, the total rises to just over a million at 1,007,090. These figures have doubled since 1997.

In other parts of the UK, the picture has been similar. Northern Ireland, for example, has, over the last few decades, seen much inward migration, which has had a marked impact on schools across the region. Statistics from the Department of

Education Northern Ireland (DENI, 2010) indicated a six-fold increase in what was termed 'newcomer children' between 2001/2 (1366 children) and 2009/10 (7899 children) across schools in Northern Ireland, with over 50 per cent of these children being in primary schools in 2009–10 (DENI, 2010). Such a development has had significant implications for teachers preparing to enter the profession (Skinner, 2010) and for the continuing professional development of experienced teachers across the region (DENI, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009b; ETI, 2005; NISRA, 2009). One particular challenge facing many teachers has been the increased numbers of children entering schools with little, if any, English. In 2012, for example, the National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC) again reported on its website as follows:

There are more than a million children between 5-16 years old in UK schools who speak in excess of 360 languages between them in addition to English. Currently there are 1,061,010 bilingual 5-16 year olds in English schools, 26,131 in Scotland, 8674 'newcomer' pupils in Northern Ireland and 30,756 EAL learners in Wales.

Clearly, such an increase brings with it both benefits and challenges.

## INCLUSION AND CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

In September 2014, the Children and Families Act came into effect in England and was followed in January 2015 by a new Code of Practice. This Act, and the subsequent Code of Practice, will, some would argue, change the face of special educational needs and/or disability education. Of note is the fact that the Act encompasses health with education and social services and places particular emphasis on the legal obligations on local authorities and professionals to view their interventions with children and young people aged 0 to 25 years. Most importantly, the Act places children at the centre of decision making and involves families much more than before in any processes affecting their children (see [www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-children-and-families-act-2014-gains-royal-assent](http://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-children-and-families-act-2014-gains-royal-assent) for a detailed account of what the Act aims to offer children and families).

The increase in diversity that has occurred across the UK in recent decades can be closely associated not only with increasing numbers of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) being educated in mainstream schools, following an international shift towards greater inclusion (UNESCO, 1994; UNICEF, 1989), but also with a number of legislative landmarks such as the 1981 Education Act (which was subsequently repealed), the Special Education Needs Disability Act (SENDA 2001) and, of course, the new Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014), all of which have endeavoured to strengthen the rights of children with SEN and/or disabilities.

There has been a significant change in attitude to children with additional needs over the past few decades, with increasing numbers of children with

additional needs being educated in mainstream schools. In England, for example, it was estimated that in 2008 there were 1,614,300 children with SEN in mainstream schools or around 20 per cent of the school population (DCSF, 2008). The statistics for other parts of the UK yielded a similar picture, with figures in Northern Ireland during 2009 indicating that there were some 60,000 children with SEN, amounting to around 17 to 18 per cent of the entire school population in mainstream schools. In Northern Ireland, the number of children with formalised Statements of Special Educational Needs rose from 2.5 per cent of the total school population in 1996/7 to around 3.9 per cent in 2007, with over two thirds of pupils with Statements being educated within mainstream schools or units attached to mainstream schools (DENI, 2009a). The number of children with additional needs in mainstream schools across the UK is now considerable (MacBlain, 2014; MacBlain et al., 2015) and, unlike in previous generations, is seen as being the norm. Indeed, the recent Children and Families Act (DfE, 2014a) and the subsequent Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) have gone further in determining the rights of children with additional needs, putting them at the centre of decision making and placing much greater emphasis on multi-agency working.

Whilst moves towards greater inclusion of children with SEN into mainstream settings have been generally welcomed (Booth and Ainscow, 2002), such increases in inclusion have presented significant challenges for teachers and early years practitioners in mainstream settings, as they have sought to meet their pupils' increasingly diverse needs. One example of the type of challenges facing early years practitioners can be found in the case of those children who struggle with the acquisition of literacy and who might have underlying cognitive deficits typical of children with dyslexia. These children may pose significant problems for adults working with them; they may, for example, require more individual and one-to-one support at the expense of time being spent on other children. A decade ago, Hartas (2006, p. 15), for example, commented in regard to this group of children as follows:

Able young children with dyslexia are likely to experience difficulties with short-term memory and hand-eye co-ordination, as well as frustration emanating from not being able to show their good intellect in their academic work. Motor skills, especially fine motor skills, often lag behind cognitive abilities, particularly in gifted children ... Regarding their self-esteem, gifted young children with dyslexia tend to be highly self-critical in that they evaluate themselves on what they are unable to do, rather than on their substantial abilities, impacting on their sense of self-worth and emotional maturity and adjustment.

Hartas has further emphasised the need for practitioners to pay particular attention to key characteristics that can alert them to learning difficulties in those children that are very able but might be perceived as less able because of their underlying specific learning difficulties.



## AUSTERITY AND POVERTY

Less than a decade ago, Cullis and Hansen (2009, p. 13) quite worryingly reported in relation to lower-income families in the UK that every £100 of extra income in the first nine months of children's lives made the difference of around a month's development by the age of 5. They also drew attention to the fact that the poorest families in society are often unable to afford books and computers, in addition to extra-curricular activities; their children's education is also more likely to be adversely affected by poor nutrition, overcrowding in the home and stress. A year later, Field (2010, p. 28) drew public attention to how:

Children from low income families in the UK often grow up to be poor adults ... [they] are more likely to have preschool conduct and behavioural problems; more likely to experience bullying and take part in risky behaviours as teenagers; less likely to do well at school; less likely to stay on at school after 16; and more likely to grow up to be poor themselves.

Many children growing up in the 'poorest' families, as Cullis and Hansen have indicated, will too often fail to have access to computers in their homes, have a lack of good reading material and may have limited learning activities, which in the case of more well-off children would in turn benefit their learning whilst in school. The implications of this can be many for significant numbers of children who may fail to have their potential realised. In a report entitled *Deprivation and Risk: The Case for Early Intervention* (Action for Children, 2010, p. 12), Dr Ruth Lupton wrote:

The relationship between deprivation and educational attainment is striking. Across the UK, children from the poorest homes start school with more limited vocabularies and greater likelihood of conduct problems and hyperactivity ... During primary school UK children fall further behind, and even the brightest children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are overtaken by the age of 10 by their better-off peers who start off behind them.

One further and very worrying feature of poverty, more recently accentuated by the growth in austerity across most economies, has been the extent to which children from the poorest families who are intellectually very able, fail to find their way into high-achieving and academically inspiring schools. In his annual report, *Unsure Start: HMCI's Early Years Annual Report 2012/13 Speech 2014*, Sir Michael Wilshaw, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (Ofsted), emphasised in the starkest of ways how poverty and low income, especially in the early years, can impact significantly on children's future realisations of potential and ultimately their life choices:

The poorest children are less likely to follow instructions, make themselves understood, manage their own basic hygiene or play well together. By age five, many children have started reading simple words, talking in sentences and can add single numbers. But far fewer of the poorest can do these things well. Children from low-income families are far more likely than their better-off peers to lag behind at age three ... Too many do badly by the end of primary, and carry on doing badly at the end of secondary. (Wilshaw, 2014, p. 3)

Sir Michael then went on to emphasise the financial cost to the nation, which at a time of growing austerity and increased economic competition amongst countries across the globe is, again, very concerning:

If the gap isn't closed, the costs to our nation will run into billions. The Sutton Trust estimates that the UK's economy would see cumulative losses of up to £1.3 trillion in GDP [Gross domestic product] over the next 40 years if the country fails to bring the educational outcomes of children from poorer homes up to the UK average. (p. 3)

It has been recognised (Sharma, 2007) that by 6 years of age children who are intellectually less able and who grow up in rich families are likely to have overtaken intellectually able children growing up in poor families. In one part of the UK, Northern Ireland, a report entitled *The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion* (DENI, 2009a, p. 12), which provided an analysis of underachievement in schools, offered the following quite worrying statistics:

Statistics show a pattern of underachievement among children living in or at risk of poverty. Using entitlement to free school meals (FSM) as an indicator of social and economic deprivation, it was reported that in 2006/07, only 27 percent of pupils who were entitled to FSM gained at least 5 or more GCSEs at grades A-C ... including English and mathematics by the time they left school, compared with 60 percent of those who were not entitled to FSM ... 'poor educational attainment can reinforce the cycle of deprivation that many ... marginalised groups experience throughout their lives'.

Three years after this report in 2012, Sir Michael Wilshaw, in addressing concerns regarding the underachievement of children in England, called for changes in the way that many children from low-income families are taught. In particular, he was openly critical of the quality of teaching that many children who experience economic deprivation and who live in more affluent rural coastal areas were receiving. His criticisms were reported at the time in the popular media and reflected concerns at a national level regarding education. Sir Michael was especially critical of those schools with the worst record of attainment in teaching disadvantaged children who were now no longer those in inner cities but, rather, in 'mediocre' schools in deprived coastal towns and rural areas across England,

where children were being incorrectly labelled and consigned to ‘indifferent’ teaching. Worryingly, an increasing polarisation in the UK and across the globe is being witnessed between the economic status of families, which in part is seen by some to be increasing the division between the ‘well off’ and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and, even more worryingly perhaps, between two-parent families where both parents are earning and lone-parent families with only one income (Baker, 2006; Bianchi and Milke, 2010). A further group of children whose needs have only recently come to be recognised are those children, of all ages, who have to care for a parent and/or an older sibling (Barnardo’s, 2015).

## CHILDREN AS CARERS

The number of children caring for adults in the UK and across the globe is increasing. This is a feature of modern societies and particularly childhood that has only recently come to be properly acknowledged and addressed in recent years (MacBlain, 2014). In 2015, the Barnardo’s organisation reported that the average age of a young carer in the UK was 12, and defined young carers as those children and young people below the age of 18 who ‘provide regular and on-going care and emotional support to a family member who is physically or mentally ill, disabled or misuses substances’. Barnardo’s cited the 2001 census, which identified 175,000 young carers in the UK, of which, astonishingly, some 13,000 were caring for someone for over 50 hours per week. Somewhat alarmingly, Barnardo’s also indicated that ten years later, the 2011 census had identified 178,000 young carers in England and Wales alone, representing a staggering increase of 83 per cent in the number of young carers aged between 5 and 7 years of age and a 55 per cent increase in the number of children as carers aged between 8 and 9 years. These figures represent substantial increases and reveal how within most schools there will be children who are caring for someone else. The effects on their lives will, in most cases, be huge. It is certain that their education will be affected and it will be important, therefore, that adults tasked with managing and supporting the learning of this group of children fully recognise and understand the impact that caring will have on their learning and on their social and emotional development.



### POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

View the following YouTube video entitled ‘Young Carers How Young is Young?’ at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMa7odqOEqw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMa7odqOEqw) (The Lowry, 2015). Then consider the following:

- 1 How might teachers in primary schools and early years practitioners work with parents and outside agencies to determine how best to support children in their learning?

- 2 What steps might teachers and early years practitioners take to gain a better understanding of the impact of caring on a young person in their class and how might they create situations where they can talk about the practicalities of what they deal with each day, whilst maintaining dignity and confidentiality for the 'cared for' person?
- 

## STATE OF PLAY IN THE UK

Everywhere one looks one sees examples of children who don't seem to know how to play. Children's play is now radically different to that of even a few years ago. Indeed, much of children's play today would be unrecognisable to parents living only a few decades ago. It is different; some would argue, too different and often lacking in quality, most particularly creativity and social and physical activity and experiences. Nearly two decades ago, McDowall Clark (2010, p. 1) highlighted what is potentially a worrying trend:

Children do not play out in the street anymore, they are rarely allowed to travel to school on their own ... Children spend an increasing proportion of their time in specially designated places such as day nurseries, out-of-school clubs and their own bedrooms, frequently fitted out with the latest technology. Childhood is progressively more regulated so that instead of being a natural part of public life, it takes place in private.

Central to the nature of children's play is an increased reliance on technology (Beauchamp, 2006, 2012), which though not a bad thing can bring problems if it dominates children's play and reduces other means of playful activities. Recently, Cook (2016, p. 3) urged caution when viewing the nature of play today:

There exists a rather strong vector of sentiment, discourse and ideology at the current moment which takes 'play' - particularly, but not exclusively, children's play - as something of an all-inclusive cure for a wide swath of social ills. Lack of creativity, learning difficulties, the polluting effects of media and commerce, the debilitations of racism and sexism, together with a variety of therapeutics, are regularly presented at the altar of play in the hope of realising some sort of transformation, some kind of conversion.

Cook goes further in proposing how:

the pilgrimage to the play deity extends seemingly in all directions without end in sight. Adults are urged to engage in playful parenting ... teachers in playful teaching...When conceptions of play (re)essentialize the child, the definitive problematic of childhood studies becomes compromised, weakened. The 'problem of the child' - that is, what (or who) a child is, how to apprehend different childhoods - dissipates and diffuses in the presence of tacit agreements about the nature and, often, the benefits of play. (2016, p. 3)

The extent of tensions surrounding the place that play has had in the education of young children was brought to the attention of the public in February 2012 when Graeme Paton, education editor for the national online UK newspaper *The Telegraph*, reported as follows:

In a letter to The Daily Telegraph, academics and authors said that controversial education reforms are robbing under-fives of the ability to play and leading to the 'schoolification' of the early years ... today's letter ... warned of 'widespread concern about the direction of the current revision' ... The experts ... suggested the system was 'too inflexible to cater for the highly diverse developmental needs of young children'. They are now creating a new group - Early Childhood Action - with the support of around 50 leading academics, authors and childcare organizations to push for an alternative curriculum.

Such tensions and the fact that they were reported in a national daily newspaper suggest major concerns regarding how children should be taught and the type of curricula they should have access to in their first years of formal education. It is recognised and accepted by most practitioners that, through play, children learn to communicate and cooperate with others and to form and manage relationships; through play they come to understand the world in which they live. The nature of play is, however, changing. Through play, children develop abilities and skills with language and, in doing so, their capacity to think (Gray and MacBlain, 2015). Play lies at the very heart of children's cognitive and emotional and social development; it is for this reason that many practitioners, academics and parents are becoming increasingly concerned that too many children today are not having enough opportunities to engage in active, meaningful and creative play activities. We now have a much better understanding of the nature of play and its importance in child development, but it remains a controversial area as witnessed by recent and current attempts by some in government within the UK to introduce more formal assessment at the age of 7!



## FOCUS ON THEORY

Smith et al. (2003, p. 218) proposed what they considered to be a key distinction between play and exploration in young children, which has arisen from the ideas of the behaviourists and the Piagetians:

Both exploration and play were awkward for traditional learning theorists, as neither was obviously goalseeking or under the control of reinforcers. It is also true that with very young children, during sensorimotor development ... the distinction between exploration and play is difficult to make, as for young infants, all objects are novel. By the preschool years, however, the distinction is clearer.

In emphasising this distinction, Smith et al. offered a conceptual framework through which it is possible to explore what is commonly understood as play. They have suggested three kinds of play: *locomotor*, *sociodramatic* and *language* play. The first of these involves physical exercise play and what is often referred to as rough-and-tumble play. The second refers to play with objects, which might include fantasy play and/or play of a sociodramatic nature. The final type has language at its core. With locomotor play, young children can be observed to engage in physical activities such as rough and tumble, running and jumping. Readers might like to reflect on how a lack of physical play might impact on a child's coordination and sensory integration and, more particularly, on their cognitive development such as problem solving and the development of logic. Readers might also reflect on the growth of Forest Schools and 'outdoor' play over the last few decades and how it can work to facilitate locomotor or physical development in children.

With regard to physical play, Pellegrini and Smith (1998, cited in Smith et al., 2003, pp. 220–1) have proposed that in physical activity play three developmental stages can be identified: (1) 'rhythmical stereotypes' such as the kicking of legs and waving of arms, as is typical of young babies; (2) 'exercise play' such as running and jumping, where the child is using their whole body, typical of children in pre-school settings, which frequently overlaps with (3) rough-and-tumble play, so often observed by adults in playground settings and by parents at home. Here, it is worth reflecting on the limited nature and experience of many young children today who spend much of their time before coming to pre-school and primary school watching television and computer screens for long periods of time (these concerns are addressed in more depth in Chapter 9 on the digital child).

Smith et al. (2003) suggest that sociodramatic play can be observed in children as young as 12 months, with the earliest type of pretend play including such behaviours as directing actions towards themselves and being dependent on the use of objects found around the home. The final type of play is language play. It is worth reflecting on how few opportunities many children have to engage in verbal communication with other children. Drawing directly on the work of Bruner, Brown (1977) suggests:

Before the child can write or read he must be able to identify the symbols and the sounds they represent ... For written language the child must also have a high degree of motor coordination ... He [Bruner] suggested that the mind of a person who spent much of his time in these activities [reading and writing] might be 'profoundly different' from that of one who was involved in nonlinguistic activities such as drawing or building, and perhaps even different from that of one who mostly talked and listened. (p. 119)

It must be emphasised that children learn a great deal from listening to rhyming poems, riddles, nursery rhymes, and so on. As they grow, they move towards

playing games that have rules with clearly defined structures. Through this type of play, they learn to manage relationships with others and understand the importance of boundaries. This latter type of play provides opportunities to be active outside of their homes and to join local clubs. Children also learn a great deal through playing outdoors (MacBlain and Bowman, 2016).

## EMERGING CURRICULA AND PROPOSED INITIATIVES

In September 2012, a major initiative was introduced in England, though not in the rest of the UK, entitled *The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2012). This became mandatory for all early years providers in England working in maintained and non-maintained schools, independent schools, and all providers on the Early Years Register, though it was acknowledged that there might be exemptions to this final group. Though generally welcomed across the sector, this initiative has divided practitioners and academics, due in the main to a perceived emphasis on the introduction of more formalised teaching and learning approaches. Though the Framework has now been superseded by the more recent *EYFS Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage: Setting the Standards for Learning, Development and Care for Children from Birth to Five* (2014), it is, nonetheless, worth visiting the key elements of the original 2012 Framework as it is in this document that we can identify the key ideas that worked towards promoting change.



Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five (EYFS, 2014):

[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/335504/EYFS\\_framework\\_from\\_1\\_September\\_2014\\_\\_with\\_clarification\\_note.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335504/EYFS_framework_from_1_September_2014__with_clarification_note.pdf)

The 2012 Framework built on existing good practice and at its core was the belief that all children should have available to them the best possible start in life and the necessary level and type of support which would enable them to fulfil their potential. In addition, the Framework embraced the notion that children today are developing at a rate more quickly than ever before and that life experiences in their first years prior to commencing formal schooling at around the age of 5 are crucial to their future lives. Positive and effective parenting was also highlighted within the 2012 Framework as being central to the holistic development of children during the early years, as was the need for children to have access to learning experiences and environments of a high quality. It was especially notable that under the Framework, Ofsted were to have particular regard to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in as much as it would inspect both the implementation and application of the new Framework and then report on the quality and

standards of provision that are being offered. Following the inspections, Ofsted would be tasked with publishing its findings and, in some instances, issuing *notices to improve* or *welfare requirements notices*. Any provider subsequently not complying with a welfare requirements notice would be committing an offence. The Framework proposed four over-arching principles, which were to be central to practice in early years settings:

- every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured
- children learn to be strong and independent through positive relationships
- children learn and develop well in enabling environments, in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers
- children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates. (DfE, 2012, p. 3)

The Framework also proposed seven areas which would be at the core of learning and development in all young children: communication and language; physical development; personal, social and emotional development; literacy; mathematics; understanding the world; and expressive arts and design. The first three of these were to be viewed as 'Prime' areas, which would be particularly crucial, with the next four being seen as 'Specific' areas, which providers should take close account of in supporting children with the development of the Prime areas. The Framework stressed the importance of providers paying particular attention to the individual needs of children, in addition to the stage of development at which children are perceived to be functioning. With the introduction of the Framework, particular attention was to be given to the Prime areas, and especially when managing the learning experiences of very young children, which, the Framework proposed, 'reflect the key skills and capacities all children need to develop and learn effectively, and become ready for school' (DfE, 2012, p. 6).

The Framework also pays particular attention to children with special educational needs and/or disabilities where specialist intervention may be called for. Purposeful and effective links with families are highlighted as important, especially when supporting parents and children in accessing appropriate support from external agencies. Particularly encouraging is the fact that the Framework places particular emphasis on the importance of assessment:

Ongoing assessment (also known as formative assessment) is an integral part of the learning and development process. It involves practitioners observing children to understand their level of achievement, interests and learning styles, and to then shape learning experiences for each child reflecting those observations. (DfE, 2012, p. 10)



Also included within the Framework is a significant and wholly welcome departure from one factor that has been a major challenge for many practitioners – the amount of paperwork they have felt it necessary to complete: ‘Assessment should not entail prolonged breaks from interaction with children, nor require excessive paperwork. Paperwork should be limited to that which is absolutely necessary to promote children’s successful learning and development’ (p. 10).

A further welcome emphasis within the Framework has been that placed on child protection and safeguarding: ‘Providers must have and implement a policy, and procedures, to safeguard children’ (p. 13). The Framework has also placed significance on the training and qualifications and skill levels of providers, in addition to their active and meaningful role in the induction of new staff and subsequent effective, purposeful and appropriate continuing professional development. At the time of the introduction of the Framework, the British Association for Early Childhood Education (2012) produced an excellent publication, *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS), which offered clear guidance for providers in a most accessible format. It offered clear information relating to the learning of children in the Prime and Specific areas from birth through 40–60 months, offering providers and parents, in addition to other relevant professionals, a focus on what they ought to expect from children at differing ages and stages of development.

In Northern Ireland, *Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning* was published in 2013 (DENI, 2013) and set out the way forward for the early years education of children from birth through to the end of the Foundation Stage; in particular, it recognises and stresses how children’s later success in school and in their future lives is determined at a very young age. It is similar to the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* in England (DfE, 2014b) in that it emphasises the importance of children growing up in positive and supportive home learning environments. It also emphasises how education and learning begin at birth and that working in partnership with parents is essential if society’s goals for children are to be achieved, the two overarching goals being ‘raising standards for all’ and ‘closing the performance gap, increasing access and equality’. In order to achieve these, the Northern Ireland Framework pointed towards three enabling goals, namely: *developing the education workforce, improving the learning environment and transforming the governance and management of education*.

It is encouraging to note that today the importance of play in its own right and as a pedagogical tool is recognised as being fundamental to high quality early years education. Maintaining play at the centre of learning in the early years is essential. Practitioners feel strongly about this and are robust in their opposition to any proposed initiatives by government seeking to lessen the emphasis play has on the learning of children in the early years. Collaborative working amongst statutory, voluntary and professional bodies, therefore, and agreed aims and goals are critical to securing improved outcomes for young children.

## SUMMARY

It is important for practitioners to examine and reflect on the changing nature of childhood and the perspectives that are popularly held of this time in the lives of individuals. Importantly, it is essential that practitioners working with young children examine their own perceptions and how these might account for meeting the individual needs of all children in their care. Exploring the changing nature of families and the shifting cultures within which children are now growing up and being educated is also a fundamental part of understanding the holistic needs of children.



## EXTENDED AND RECOMMENDED READING

Bianchi, S.M. and Milke, M.A. (2010) 'Work and family research in the first decade of the 21st century', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72: 705-25.

Marzano, R. and Kendall, J.S. (2006) *The New Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (2nd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA/London: Sage.

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