UNDERSTANDING THE EARLY YEARS

How children learn in Nursery and Reception

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What is the Early Years Foundation Stage?

The EYFS is a key stage from birth to 5 years of age. It is followed by childminders, nurseries and pre-schools even before children join school. At Highwood the EYFS is covered in the following:

- Nursery – 3 to 4 years
- Reception – 4 to 5 years
- Transition into Year 1 – first term

Early Years Foundation Stage

Four over-arching principles of EYFS:

- **A unique child.** Every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self assured.
- **Positive relationships.** Children learn to be strong and independent through positive relationships.
- **Enabling environments**. The environment plays a key role in supporting and extending children's development and learning.
- **Learning and development**. Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates and all areas of Learning and Development are equally important and inter-connected.

How Young Children Learn

Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL):

- **Playing and Exploring** - children investigate and experience things, and 'have a go'.
- **Active Learning** - children concentrate and keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoy achievements.
- **Creating and Thinking Critically** - children have and develop their own ideas, make links between ideas, and develop strategies for doing things.

EYFS Curriculum – Seven Areas of Learning

The 3 Prime areas are critical for the development of young children and are fundamental to more structured learning as they get older. :

- Communication and Language
- Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- Physical Development

- Literacy
- Mathematics
- Understanding the World
- Expressive Arts and Design

It is important to remember that the seven areas are not taught as separate subjects, they all overlap.

A typical day in Early Years

- Busy Fingers
- Physi-Gym
- Register
- Carpet session
- Child-initiated Learning (play)
- Phonics
- Lunch
- Maths
- Child-initiated Learning (play)
- Story time
- Home time



Where is the learning in this timetable?

The Importance of Play

Jean Piaget, a well-respected child psychologist who specialised in child development, said:

"Play is the work of childhood"

Children in the early years do most of their learning through play. This is why we try to give the children in Nursery and Reception two long, uninterrupted sessions of child-initiated learning each day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.
During these times the children can choose what they want to play with and can also choose to play indoors or outdoors.

Time to Play!

- Spend some time playing with the resources on the different tables.
- These are typical activities that your children will be engaging in during child-initiated learning time.
- While you are playing, think about the learning that might be taking place.

Home-Corner

What learning is happening?

- Language and conversation - speaking and listening
- Role play and imagination
- Mark-making/writing
- Counting and number
- Social skills – sharing and turn-taking
- Understanding the world – families, cultures, traditions
- Vocabulary



Duplo

What learning is happening?

- Maths — size, number, comparison, shape
- Physical — hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills
- Communication — explaining ideas
- PSED — collaboration and perseverance
- Problem solving
- Vocabulary
- Understanding cause and effect



Play Dough



What learning is happening?

- Fine motor skills – squeezing, rolling, pinching and cutting develop hand and finger strength and control
- Hand-eye coordination – using tools and positioning small pieces accurately
- Mathematics – counting, comparing sizes, recognising shapes and exploring quantity
- Early literacy – making marks, creating a bakery sign and developing an understanding that writing has meaning
- Communication and language – talking, explaining ideas, listening to others and learning new vocabulary
- Imaginative play – using play dough to represent real things
- Social skills – sharing resources, taking turns, negotiating roles and working together
- Problem-solving – working out how to create different shapes
- Creativity – choosing what to make and experimenting

Small World



What learning is happening?

- Communication and language – talking, listening, explaining ideas and developing vocabulary
- Imaginative play – creating stories, characters and situations
- Storytelling – developing an understanding of characters, events and sequencing
- Social skills – sharing resources, taking turns, negotiating roles and developing ideas together.
- Understanding the world – animals, people, vehicles, homes
- Physical development – developing fine motor skills by picking up and positioning small objects
- PSED – developing confidence and co-operation
- Vocabulary development – learning and using increasingly specific words to describe animals, places, actions and positions.



What are the adults doing?

👀 1. Observing- adults watch the children carefully to find out what the children already know, what they are trying to do and what they might be ready to learn next.

💬 2. Interacting - adults talk with children and introduce new vocabulary. Children love learning and using new words. It is important to use correct vocabulary and to build on what they already know.

🧠 3. Modelling - adults demonstrate language, behaviour and skills. Talking aloud while doing an activity is very powerful.

🚀 4. Extending - adults take children's ideas one step further. Adults get to know the children and what their individual next steps are.

How can I help my child at home?

Activity	Learning
Cooking	Maths, language, physical development
Shopping	Counting, money, communication
Getting dressed	Independence, sequencing, physical development
Reading a story	Language, comprehension, imagination
Going to the park	Physical development, problem solving
Tidying toys	Sorting, counting, responsibility
Making a den	Design, teamwork, vocabulary
Playing shops	Maths, literacy, communication
Gardening	Science, nature, vocabulary
Singing nursery rhymes	Phonics, rhythm, memory, language

Screen Time

The UK Government introduced new guidance for under-5s in March 2026:

- **Under 2s:** avoid screen time wherever possible, apart from shared activities that support bonding, interaction and conversation — for example, video calling grandparents.
- **Age 2–5:** aim for **no more than 1 hour of screen time a day**, with less being better where possible.
- Try to avoid screens **during mealtimes and in the hour before bedtime**.
- Keep **solo screen use to a minimum** and, where possible, watch or play **together with your child**. Talk about what they are seeing and ask questions.
- Choose **age-appropriate, slower-paced content** and avoid fast-paced, social-media-style videos for young children.
- Try to keep **bedrooms and mealtimes screen-free**. Also consider turning off the TV or other screens in the background when children are playing.

Useful websites

https://www.gov.uk/early-years-foundation-stage

https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/sites/default/files/what_to_expect_when._a_parents_guide.pdf

https://beststartinlife.gov.uk/screen-time-under-5s/

https://wordsforlife.org.uk/