

Building a Curriculum Around the Child:

Stage-appropriate learning, strong foundations and the EYFS

Core message: An early years curriculum is not simply a timetable, topic list or finished product. It is the professional thinking behind what children experience every day through relationships, play, routines, language, environment and opportunities.

1. Curriculum is not just what is written down

It is not only a timetable, worksheet sequence, textbook, display board or product.

A finished product may please adults, but the most meaningful learning is often in the process.

Ask what the child was choosing, exploring, repeating, saying, testing, solving and becoming more confident to do.

2. Start with the child

What journey is this child making?

What foundations are being strengthened?

What might this child be ready to practise, revisit, deepen or extend next?

3. Stage-appropriate, not pressure-led

Parents want the best for their child, but adult-looking outcomes are not always the best evidence of progress.

Children should not be rushed into formal tasks before foundations are secure.

Strong foundations include language, attention, movement, emotional security, independence, problem-solving, persistence and play.

4. EYFS and guidance

The EYFS gives the statutory framework and the Areas of Learning and Development.

Development Matters and Birth to 5 Matters support thinking about child development and possible pathways of learning.

Guidance should inform professional judgement. It should not replace knowing the child.

5. Child development is the backbone

A responsive curriculum does not simply say, “This is what the two-year-old class does.”

Sometimes the right decision is to repeat, slow down, provide more time, add language, offer movement, or support emotional security.

This is not holding children back. It helps them move forward securely.

6. How children learn matters

The Characteristics of Effective Learning should influence the experiences, environment and adult interactions we provide.

Curiosity, concentration, persistence, problem-solving, making links and trying again are habits for lifelong learning.

These are foundations for later formal learning, not soft extras.

7. Play is the medium for learning

Through play, children practise, revisit, connect and deepen learning.

Play supports communication, thinking, well-being, relationships, creativity and problem-solving.

When designing curriculum, ask: what play opportunities will help children practise, explore, communicate, think and make connections?

8. Structure should support responsiveness

Children need rhythm, routines and reliable experiences.

Staff need organisation and leaders need to know what is being offered.

Structure should support responsiveness, not replace it.

9. The world children live in

Curriculum should be shaped by children, families, language, culture, community, local environment and the wider world.

This will look different in different countries, communities and settings.

The aim is not to copy someone else’s topic plan. It is to help children understand, connect with and extend their own world.

10. Interests are the doorway

Interests help us engage children, but interests are not the whole curriculum.

Educators use interests to introduce language, widen experience and build foundations.

The interest is the doorway. Curriculum thinking is what we build through that doorway.

11. The adult role

Adults notice, interpret, adapt, narrate, model, join play sensitively and step back when needed.

Adults nudge learning, involve parents and decide what comes next.

A textbook does not know the child. The educator does.

12. Questions for leaders

Is our curriculum stage-appropriate?

Is it responsive to the children?

Does it protect play?

Does it build strong foundations?

Are children's interests used to extend learning?

Can every child access it and feel they belong?

Are parents helped to understand learning, not simply pleased with products?

Can staff explain what children are learning, how they are learning and why it matters?

Is the curriculum actually being lived out in the rooms?

13. Inclusion from the beginning

A curriculum should not only work for the confident child, the compliant child or the child who is already ahead.

It should work for children who need more time, movement, language, sensory support, different communication, or greater challenge.

Inclusion is not an adjustment at the end. It should be part of curriculum thinking from the beginning.

Reflection task

Choose one child in your setting and think about these questions:

What are they showing you through their play, interests and interactions?

What foundation might need strengthening?

What experience, language, resource, routine or adult interaction could help them next?

How could you explain this learning to parents without relying on a finished product?

Final thought: The curriculum is not just the plan on the wall. It is the professional thinking behind children's everyday experiences.