

Characteristics of Effective Learning

Active Learning

Active learners are involved, excited and interested; they use and apply what they are learning, become deeply involved, and bounce back easily from difficulties. Active learning is all about the individual; it is not something that can be done to you. For children to develop into self-regulating, lifelong learners they are required to take ownership, be motivated, accept challenge and learn persistence.

The EYFS describes three aspects of active learning:

Being involved and concentrating



This aspect is about the depth of children's understanding of their own learning. When babies and children are truly engaged in an activity that interests them, they become totally absorbed, will not be easily distracted and can focus on the activity for extended periods of time, relevant to their age.

While exploring and experimenting, children may repeat an action or activity for extended periods of time until they are satisfied. Adults should embrace and encourage this repetition, as these types of experiences create deeper learning than just 'being told' and put children in an emotional learning environment of trust and control.

With all activities it is important to allow children to explore the process of what they are doing as well as the end product. For example, when encouraging children to create a vehicle with junk, if some are more interested in playing with the glue and exploring its properties, they should be encouraged to experience this learning and leave the creation of a vehicle to another time.

Keep on trying

Learning to bounce back from difficulties and challenges, having self-belief and the ability to change strategies are linked to the importance of learning persistence.

Children begin to develop persistence as they complete activities that interest and motivate them. The adult's role is to scaffold babies' and children's learning when they are outside their 'comfort zone' providing real opportunities for children to extend and challenge what they know. When babies and children learn to keep going in the face of something that is just out of reach, something that may be frustrating, difficult, demanding, even frightening, then the importance of persistence becomes clear. The intrinsic reward of overcoming difficulty supports them to continue to challenge themselves.

It is important to develop an environment where children are encouraged to 'delay gratification' so they learn that even though the outcome they want to achieve may be hidden, working through difficulties and not just settling for the first solution will bring more success and personal reward. Under these circumstances, children will become emotionally resilient and more responsible for their own relationships and learning.

Enjoying achieving what they set out to do

When children are allowed to make choices about what they initiate, explore and experience, they will be intrinsically motivated to take their own learning forward. This learning is likely to be self-sustaining for extended periods of time or for as long as the child is interested. When children are involved in an activity that does not motivate and excite them, but is connected to receiving a reward from a third party, they are likely only to sustain the activity if the attention of the adult and reward stays in place.



Enjoyment of learning is crucial for children; play allows them to be passionate, enthusiastic, expressive, purposeful and emotional, naturally demonstrating their expertise. Adults need to consider carefully how they use praise, making sure it is connected to the effort or the experience the child is having rather than achievement. When praise is stereotypical or is perceived as a label, it creates a belief which is fixed such as 'I am good at climbing', 'I can't climb', 'I can write', 'I am not a good writer'. In both cases whether the person feels talented or not, they develop a 'fixed mindset' where it is the talent that creates the success not the effort, so their development is limited. It is important for children to have a 'growth mindset' where they believe that the amount of effort they put in, how they work through difficulties and the process of their learning will allow anything to be possible.

Implications for provision

- Provide an environment where activities excite and are on the edge of children's understanding without being overwhelming.
- Keep activities which interest the children out rather than routinely tidy them away.
- Resources should be stimulating, inventive, imaginative, varied, open-ended, freely available and related to the children's interests.
- Consider the amount of time available in sessions for children to be completely involved in their own learning.
- Encourage children to work together and learn from each other to create a 'learning community'.
- Have photographs of previous learning readily available to discuss with children.
- Use observations to note children's enjoyment and commitment and then provide similar activities.
- Plan activities which provide children with a reason to become involved.

Adult role

- Be involved in, encourage and scaffold repetitious play.
- Know if children have a specific schema and provide resources to enable and extend the child's learning.
- Extend and scaffold learning which is just outside of the child's comfort zone.
- Teach specific skills when appropriate to move learning forward.
- Encourage children to use the correct vocabulary related to activities that interest them.
- When you observe concentration, be cautious about breaching it.
- Support children to focus and calm over-stimulated children.
- Support children to become problem solvers rather than solving problems for them.
- Talk through different approaches to difficulties – don't just jump in and take over.
- Allow children to be challenged in their learning to build emotional resilience. Adults should only step in just before children become frustrated.
- Feedback should be explicit about behaviour connected to learning, such as solving problems, new ideas, concentrating, succeeding. Avoid praise or rewards just connected to an end product.
- Support parents to understand why 'delaying gratification' is important for children.
- Support parents to encourage their children to solve problems at home.