

16. Learning in the Early Years Policy

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Our Image of Young Children

We believe that right from birth, children are strong and confident learners. They are the first great researchers who explore, test their ideas, solve problems and try to make sense of their world.

We believe that learning is social in nature so we encourage and support children's interactions with other children and adults.

We understand that young children learn through seeing, hearing and doing. They are active learners and we aim to ensure that their environment promotes and protects the use of all senses.

Our Responsibility

We believe it is our responsibility to support children to enjoy learning, be confident to take risks, ask questions and understand that confusion and doubt are part of real learning. We aim to fulfil our responsibility by planning projected learning experiences, which are linked to curriculum requirements. We understand that these experiences need to be challenging but achievable, so that children's self-image is not harmed.

We listen carefully and respectfully to children so that the experiences we plan build on their interests, strengths and questions.

Young children need time and space to learn effectively. We, therefore, place a high value on time and offer children many opportunities to repeat, revisit and reflect on their previous experience.

Our Aims

We, therefore, aim to support young children:

- to be confident, independent and aspirational;
- to form and maintain positive relationships, to work collaboratively and be valued members of the community;
- to take responsibility for themselves, each other and their environment;
- to question, challenge and solve problems creatively;
- to know their strengths and to have the confidence to take risks; and
- to know that their ideas will be heard and respected and that they can make a difference.

Rationale for Learning in the Early Years

At North Nibley Pre-school, learning in the early years is celebrated and promoted as a profoundly important stage of development, when vital emotional, social and cognitive functions are being formed in the brain (Blakemore, 2000). We do not view the early years as merely a prologue or a time of preparation for anything subsequent but valuable in its own right.

Supporting our youngest children to develop understanding is the aim of our early education policy. This has required us to re-examine the 'transitional' model of learning, where the adult's role is to transmit knowledge to the child. We believe that authentic learning and human understanding requires feelings and emotions to be fully engaged. For us it is a complex process that involves more than just the disciplines of cognition. We, therefore, view our youngest children as strong and competent thinkers, not as weak and empty vessels to be filled up with pre-determined knowledge.

Young Children as 'Mastery Learners'

The values that underpin our work with the youngest children in the setting aim to promote an image of children as rich, powerful learners and problem solvers. Young children are supported and encouraged to become 'mastery learners' (Dweck, 1995) – to ask questions take risks, develop resilience and take responsibility for learning. In this way we aim to give high regard to the processes of learning more than the product or outcomes. We believe that the 'imbalances' in young children's thinking should be valued and respected as much as that of reality because they are part of the process of learning and understanding. Therefore, curiosity, confusion, doubt and error are not viewed as moments of weakness or fragility to be overcome quickly but rather the thoughts and emotions that promote further and deeper hypotheses and theories. In this way, they are valued as the characteristics or authentic research and creativity (Rinaldi, 2001).

Our youngest children are viewed and supported as researchers who deserve our trust and respect as thinkers and co-constructors of understanding and learning.

Self-image

We understand that without positive self-image, learning is impossible. Therefore, creating esteeming experiences and activities are central to teaching and learning in the early years at North Nibley Pre-school. This requires a community of people within the setting who really look and listen for young children's interests, strengths, and the questions they are asking (either verbally or non-verbally) and the problems they are trying to solve. The experiences that we create to scaffold, challenge and prompt their thinking will have the potential to either detract or enhance their self-image. It is, therefore, vitally important that the adult-originated experiences do no harm to a child's self-image or image as a learner.

Social Nature of Learning

We believe that learning is a process of social construction and acknowledge the pivotal role of relationships and interactions in all human learning.

Our young children are challenged, encouraged and supported to work with others and to develop a strong sense of connection, community, collaborative enquiry, altruism and cooperation. We believe that interaction between young children has its own kind of productivity for learning (Malgasy, 1998). It enables young children to negotiate and

communicate in ways that are often more open, frequent and stimulating than those with adults. (See 'Rationale for Relationships and Interactions'). We, therefore, aim to construct experiences that develop children's roles in learning groups, supports their emotional engagement and creates a sense a shared history.

Supporting Children's Learning

We believe that young children learn because they want to and have the right to communicate their learning in many different ways. We understand that young children may be non-verbal or have difficulties in communicating through speech, so we aim to encourage children to express themselves through many forms of communication. This might include; dramatic play, shadow play, painting, sculpture, dance, puppetry, drawing and collage.

It is our role to trust the children and seek out their powerful, rich and competent ways in which they may communicate their understanding. In this way children's well-being, interest and involvement can be enhanced (Laevers, 1994).

Play and Time for Learning and Reflection

We acknowledge that young children need to be offered the gifts of time and freedom so that they can make connections in their learning, repeat their actions, develop and internalise their understanding. They need time to re-visit and reflect on their previous learning so that they begin to develop memory trace and meta-cognitive processes. We, therefore, aim to use time flexibly, without pressures of outcomes and in the best interest of our youngest learners.

Play is a very powerful vehicle for learning for young children. During play they often practise newly acquired skills, refine their understanding and perform cognitively beyond their actual development (Vygotsky, 1978). Play is defined at North Nibley Pre-school as central to the work of our youngest children. It is their 'business' and we give it high regard and time throughout the Foundation Stage.

Conclusions

In teaching our youngest children we, therefore, draw the following conclusions about their learning:

- young children learn best in social contexts – in learning groups with other children and adults;
- young children learn by actively exploring and constructing their understanding of the world through their research, hypotheses and theories;
- young children learn through their own self-initiated play;
- young children will express their learning and understanding in a variety of ways; and
- that language development facilitates their learning at all levels.

Rationale for Relationships and Interactions

Child to Child Interactions

We believe that young children are born trying to make sense of their social world and that human life is essentially co-operative. When adults stand back a little and listen to children's interactions, we are more likely to understand the questions they are asking, their preferences and competencies.

We, therefore, aim to provide young children with opportunities and time to solve problems together, play together, eat together and make decisions and choices together.

Behaviour Management

Young children's emotions are often immediate and intense. They can often become involved in conflict as they develop a sense of self and independence. We understand the word 'discipline' comes from the word 'disciple' or a person accepting the teachings of another. We need to be aware that young children may not understand the behaviours we value. Young children will need to desired behaviours to be modelled by adults and positively reinforced. We aim to motivate our children to want to follow and accept our 'teaching' through positive feedback about themselves as people.

We aim to use the following conflict resolution techniques when working with young children:

1. Approach calmly – use a calm voice, gentle touch and remain neutral.
2. Acknowledge children's intense feelings – 'I can see you are really angry ...'
3. Gather information – 'It looks like the problem is ...'
4. Restate the problem – 'So the problem is ...'
5. Ask for ideas and possible solutions if appropriate, and choose one together – 'What can we do to solve the problem?'
6. Be prepared to give support – model behaviour stay nearby.

We always separate the child from the behaviour and describe the behaviours we value, eg. 'we need to walk because' rather than 'don't run'. In this way, the child's self-image is not damaged and we encourage the children to focus on the positive behaviour.

Adult to Child Relationships and the Role of the Adult

We believe that the question of 'who am I' cannot be answered without reference to the evaluations of others. We, therefore, aim to protect and promote children's self-image by establishing supportive relationships with our children.

We believe that young children have rights and needs that are best supported by the ways in which we interact with them.

We believe that children have the right to:

- warm, respectful and responsive relationships;
- trust the adults who work with them;
- genuineness;
- be treated consistently and predictably;
- work with adults who understand them, who listen and look; and
- work with adults who value all children regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, ability/disability.

In planning, supporting and stimulating learning, the adult's role is one of a researcher, analyst, planner and facilitator. We may stand aside to watch and gather evidence for planning (formative assessment) and then analyse and 'sum up' that evidence (summative assessment). We then plan developmentally appropriate learning experiences for the children. During this process, we may scaffold the children's learning through our thoughtful interactions with them.

Scaffolding might include:

- providing a commentary;
- supporting children to make comments;
- encouraging independence and risk taking;
- sometimes holding back and allowing children to discover 'imbalances' in their thinking and hypotheses;
- role modelling;
- answering children's questions;
- asking questions to stimulate thinking but not to close down children's ideas;
- listening and observing children's patterns of behaviour (schemas and interests); and
- making timely changes to the learning environment to provoke and challenge children's thinking, imagining and research.

In all these ways we promote and protect young children's self-image and learning within the context of meaningful relationships and interactions.

Adult to Adult Relationships

Working in a profession that requires a great deal of humanity, patience, empathy and energy can leave reserves for relationships with colleagues a little depleted. However, we know that very young children watch, imitate and make deductions about the quality of relationships between adults. We, therefore, aim to support our interactions with each other through a range of support systems. These might include mentoring, colleagues, staff meetings, staff appraisal, local networks and generally promoting a culture of 'openness and mutual support'.

We believe it is vital that support systems are available for staff so that respectful trusting relationships can be modelled for young children.

Related Documents

- Policy for Learning in Early Years
- Policy for Assessment, Planning and Record Keeping
- Rationale for Time Organisation
- Rationale for the Physical Environment.

Rationale for Time Organisation

Alongside the quality of relationships and interactions, we believe that time in young children's learning deserves very high regard. We know that the nature of young children's learning is based upon emotions, making meaning and hypotheses. We also understand that to establish memory trace, young children require many opportunities to repeat and revise their thinking and ideas.

We aim to plan learning experiences that build upon previous knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes. These experiences will need to allow the children time to repeat and rehearse their skills and knowledge.

In order to promote learning, these experiences may need to be changed to incorporate slight variations over a period of time.

In our guiding planning, we work with a timetable to build order and flexibility into our work. However, we aim to avoid the 'tyranny of the timetable' and have the confidence to adapt our time organisation to meet the changing, daily interests of the children.

In organising our time with children we aim to balance the need for child initiated and adult originated work. Before children begin the Foundation Stage, they will require plenty of opportunity to initiate their own learning. This balance will shift very slowly until at the end of the Reception year, when children's time for learning will be managed more through adult originated experiences.

Time is organised on a daily basis following High Scope principles but with flexibility also at the heart of our time organisation. We aim to provide children with the opportunity to plan part of their day and be supportive to achieve what they set out to do. We also aim to offer time for the children to reflect on their experiences and be listened to by other children and adults.

Time sitting still is kept to a minimum, as we understand the difficulties young children have in sustaining this level of physical control and concentration.

Time is organised for outdoors to reflect our belief that the outside is an extension of our indoor rooms. Where possible, there is no defined time for outdoors, thereby offering the children choice about their learning environment. If outdoor time is managed through a timetable, then outside space is still organised to develop young children's thinking, emotions, social skills, cognitive and communication skills as well as their physical ones.

In summary, time is organised to enhance children's natural rhythms for learning and to be both ordered and flexible.

Related Documents

- Policy for Learning in the Early Years
- Policy for Assessment, Planning and Record Keeping
- Rationale for Relationships and Interactions
- Rationale for the Physical Environment

Rationale for the Physical Environment

We believe that the physical environment has the potential to stimulate, provoke and enhance learning for young children. We understand that young children learn holistically and through all their senses. In this way, the physical environment offers opportunities for children's research and investigations. Our aim is to create a generous learning environment through careful considerations of the physical environment we offer to them.

We believe that the environment needs to be welcoming, stimulating and flexible. This involves an environment that promotes every child's progress in social interactions, cognitive and communication skills, dispositions and physical environment. We also aim to offer materials and equipment that reflect a wide variety of different cultural experiences.

In creating a generous learning environment we aim to follow these broad guidelines:

- provide 'psychological comfort' and be 'physically friendly';
- support children's sensory-motor approach to learning;
- establish order and flexibility;
- create spaces for relations and options;
- promote choice and independence;
- provide a balance of found and manufactured materials – open-ended materials;
- provide for personal space and retreat;
- create challenging opportunities; and
- provide variety – design and construct timely changes to inspire and stimulate children's curiosity and research.

Related Documents

- Policy for Learning in the Early Years
- Policy for Assessment, Planning and Record Keeping
- Rationale for Relationships and Interactions
- Rationale for Time Organisation
- Equality and Diversity Policy

It is essential that our setting reflects fully the rich multi-cultural community to which our children and families belong.

Policy for Assessment, Planning and Record Keeping

At North Nibley Pre-school, staff observe children daily to record and note each child's learning and interests. This information is then used to plan activities to develop the child's individual learning.

The observations form a major part of assessment of each child's learning and development. One observation gives a clue, and the build up of continuous observations can be used to reflect on a child's progress from various viewpoints, eg. relationships, development in play, mathematics, language, literacy or imagination. What a child can do (rather than what she/he can't do) is the starting point in the child's education.

The observations are collated into a profile called the 'Learning Journey'. This is done online using a system called Tapestry. For every child the journal is arranged into the seven areas of the Foundation Stage Curriculum.

A child's 'Learning Journey' is a living record document and is supported by the continuous gathering and collating of a variety of materials. Records can take many forms: observations; photos of children's drawings, mark making, paintings etc; documentation; learning pathways or maps; and a record of the child's involvement at events in the community and at home.

On a regular basis each child has the opportunity to share their 'Learning Journey' with a member of staff and are encouraged to contribute their view of their learning and progress. This is recorded in the document.

Parents and carers are invited to share their child's 'Learning Journey' on a daily basis. Parents are encouraged to make comments about the child's development on the observation. Our aim is to work in partnership with parents, establishing a continuing dialogue between home and North Nibley Pre-school in order to share and understand together the needs of each child. We recognise and value parents as well as a child's experiences and achievements within their own family and community cultures.

The 'Learning Journey' is each child's progress file and is available at all times. When children leave the setting they take with them a pdf file of their 'Learning Journey' and a summative report. This is a useful record of their achievement not only for the child and his/her family, but also for the staff at the child's next Pre-school, nursery or school.