Achieving Excellence in the Early Years

Key principles of the early years
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Introduction
- Working in the early years is the most important job in society. The foundational years determine not merely the lives of individual children but the community within which they grow up.
- Young children’s learning is distinctive and the pedagogy used with them needs to be responsive to their approach to learning.
- Having and holding on to principles may seem difficult in the current political climate but this makes it all the more imperative. Principles give educationalists a benchmark against which to evaluate what they are asked to do and how.
- Early childhood practice has a long, tried and tested history underpinned by many shared key principles. It has been more heavily researched than any other phase or area of education so principles have a strong evidence base.

What are the key principles underpinning practice?
1. Young children are robust thinkers not fragile learners. Humans are born with limitless potential which is drawn from our:
   - insatiable curiosity, pattern-seeking; and drive to identify and solve problems
   - irresistible drive to imitate those in the world around us
   - innate playfulness,
   - sociability and the need to communicate.

2. Pedagogy matters - it’s not just what we want children to learn but how they learn that is recognised as being of being of fundamental importance. There is a distinctive early years pedagogy which includes:
   - offering choices
   - learning together with and from others
   - listening
   - open-ended experiences and resources
   - playfulness and joyfulness
   - a generous learning environment with a plethora of meaningful first-hand experiences (Swann et al 2012).
3. A pedagogy which is driven by informed and well-qualified experts.

4. A commitment to nurturing positive learning dispositions. This will involve rooting out practices which undermine positive learning dispositions as well as ensuring recognition of:
   • the elemental role of emotional well-being.
   • the lasting impact of physical well-being on learning and thinking which are increasingly well understood
   • the making of shared meanings through talk, interaction and symbolic behaviours
   • the value of involvement with nature and the avoidance of learned helplessness through learning to manage risk
   • the development of *executive function* which involves working memory; flexible thinking and self-control.

5. Respect for and understanding of the role of parents. A supportive home learning environment includes reading to children; going to the library; playing with numbers and letters; painting and drawing; singing songs and rhymes. Young children can only be adequately supported if this principle is embraced.

**Conclusion**
The key importance of high quality provision will be highlighted particularly amongst vulnerable groups

**Further reading**
Gray, P. (2013) *Free to learn* Basic Books

LP March 2015