Including two-year-olds in schools: a briefing for school leaders

Sir Michael Wilshaw, HM Inspector of Schools

Sir Michael Wilshaw’s remarks during the launch of Ofsted’s Annual Early Years Report predictably triggered an intensive debate between supporters of school-based provision and those who worry about increasing formalisation and ‘schoolification’ in the early years.

The government’s key aim in funding provision for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds is to close the attainment gap which sees children from deprived areas at risk of falling behind from the very beginning of their school years. Leo Feinstein’s seminal research, published in 2003, painted a very gloomy picture of how children’s educational outcomes in the 1970s were shaped by social factors from their very earliest years. Feinstein found that educational outcomes were largely predicted by social class. Yet since the 1970s, there has been a growing evidence base which demonstrates that high quality early education and care can positively influence the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children. Most notably, one of the world’s largest longitudinal studies of the effect of early education, the Effective Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) project, has shown how these benefits persist through secondary schooling, impacting on the number and grades of GCSEs gained (Sylva et al, 2014).

Despite all that heated debate about whether this is best done in schools, or group settings in the private, voluntary or independent sector, or in home-based childcare, what the evidence shows us is that what really matters is not the type of setting but its quality, which is principally determined by the knowledge and qualifications of the workforce. We know that graduate- and teacher-led settings are more effective in closing the attainment gap (Mathers et al, 2014). Children from disadvantaged areas also benefit more from being in a good social mix, so setting up provision purely to deliver funded places to the most deprived two-year-olds will be less beneficial than including them in a setting with children from other backgrounds. Schools are certainly not the only organisations which can provide this type of high-quality early education and care: but they are well-placed to do so.

So, is your school the right environment for two-year-old provision and what would you gain from offering it?

Benefits include:

- Help more children to arrive at the beginning of compulsory schooling with good levels of development
- Improve transitions
- Build stronger relationships with parents; better supported parents can more effectively support their children’s learning and development

Is it right for your school?

- Will you be fulfilling a need for high quality provision for two-year-olds in the local area?
- Will you be able to provide a social mix, for example by offering paid-for places alongside the free entitlement for disadvantaged children?
- What expertise do you have within your current Early Years team? What additional development needs will your staff have? What additional staffing will you need?
Time and provision of their own. "They are sometimes known as the "terrible two's" and may not be able to share and 'play nicely' with others. However, these perceived ills are part of their developmental stage and the fact that these children are at least a year younger than those with whom many nursery staff usually work is significant.

Two-year-olds are different from three- and four-year-olds.

Two-year-olds often get a rough deal. They are sometimes known as the 'terrible two's' and may not be able to share and 'play nicely' with others. However, these perceived ills are part of their developmental stage and the fact that these children are at least a year younger than those with whom many nursery staff usually work is significant.

Although two-year-olds will learn from, and often enjoy the company of older children, they tend to behave differently as they are still developing some of the skills that three- and four-year-olds have already mastered to some extent.

They behave differently. For instance they live in the moment and are impulsive. 'I see, I want, I take' is often how they operate. They are very op- mental, and although they need to learn to share and take turns, this is a gradual process and it is inappropriate to expect high levels of complicity and empathy with others. It is important to ensure that there are plenty of open ended resources that two-year-olds can use without constantly being a motivated learner able to regulate their own thinking and learning through the character- ofself-regulation.

As Mathieson (2013:55) says, "Two-year-olds are usually extremely alert and are interested in everything around them. They are in many ways the embodiment of these characteristics. It is through their play and exploring that children engage with the world. Active learning is all about being a motivated learner able to persist in achieving one's own goals and understanding and trying new things critically is where we use imagination, make links and try out strategies to become more successful."
Staff qualifications, training and development

Putting together your staff team will be one of the most difficult, but also most important, decisions you will make when planning to admit two-year-olds. It is now very well-evidenced that early years provision which is teacher or graduate-led is the most effective. Significantly, the EYPS research also found that staff with lower levels of qualification worked most effectively when they were led by a graduate or teacher. Qualified teachers will only be trained to work with two-year-olds if they have an additional qualification such as Early Years Professional Status or Early Years Teacher Status.

The minimum level of qualification recommended in the recent Nutbrown Review is an appropriate level 3 award – the Diploma in Children’s and Young People’s Workforce has just been replaced by a range of Early Years Educator courses. The DFE online qualification finder enables you to check whether a candidate’s qualifications are considered ‘full and relevant’.

In all cases, qualifications should be seen as a starting point for a person’s professional development, especially if some staff are more experienced in working with older children in the EYFS. Further courses and publications may be available through your local authority, or you may choose to work with a national provider like Early Education. The EYFS statutory framework also requires all settings to offer staff regular supervision, which ‘provides support, coaching and training for the practitioner and promotes the interest of children’. Two-year-olds can present with very powerful emotions and working with their families can present complex challenges, so regular, planned supervision is essential. ‘Supervision – speaking personally’, an overview of one nursery school’s approach, was in Nursery World in February 2014.

Next steps

With many LAs still struggling to place the two-year-olds eligible for funded places, and the possibility of places for all twos now on the political agenda thanks to the Lib Dems, the need for high-quality places is unlikely to go away. Not every school will, could or should pursue this option, but for those who do, there is less red tape as separate registration with Ofsted is no longer required. Information and advice is available from LAs and the government’s Achieving 2 Year Olds programme, and professional support for staff is available from Early Education. Making good use of these resources can help you choose the right way forward for your school.

References and further reading

Cheshire East Early Years Team (2013) Are You Ready for Me – now I’m 2, Cheshire: Cheshire East Council

Community Playthings with Jan White (2013) A good place to be: two, developing quality environments indoors and out, Robertbridge: Community Playthings


Effective Pre-School, Primary & Secondary Education (EPPSE) Project: online, available at www.ioe.ac.uk/research/153.html


Vollans, C (2014) Supervision – speaking personally online: (Nursery World subscribers only) www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1142329/positive-relationships-supervision-speaking-personally


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