Next steps

With Development Matters removed from both the Department for Education’s website and the Ofsted inspectors’ guidance, Lena Engel examines its history and asks what the implications are for practice.

Development Matters is the guidance that was commissioned by Government to accompany the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum when it was implemented in 2008. This document was intended as a reference guide about child development from birth to five years. The idea was that it be distributed to all settings along with the other EYFS documents so that everyone had access to some child development information, which would help them to support, assess and plan for children’s progress.

When the EYFS was revised in 2012, Development Matters was updated to reflect the changes to the seven areas of learning and the reduction in the number of early learning goals. However, since then there has been a great deal of controversy over the document.

In consequence, the Department for Education (DfE) has now removed it from its website and replaced it with the Early Years Outcomes document, which is a simpler checklist to plan and assess children’s progress towards the early learning goals. So what is the significance of what has occurred? And what can practitioners do in future to support children’s progress?

The EYFS curriculum document was produced to combine both previous documents and, therefore, was aimed at the whole range of birth to five years. It was also made compulsory in 2008 for all primary schools in the maintained sector to follow the EYFS in reception classes, so that children’s progress would be monitored at the end of the year, according to what they had achieved in all 69 early learning goals across the six areas of learning.

The Development Matters guidance at this stage incorporated what was considered innovative in the Birth to Three Matters document, and these ideas became the EYFS Principles, which included specific reference to: A Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments and...
Yet since the EYFS and Development Matters revisions, internal debates at the DfE questioned whether the latter’s continued existence as a preferred guidance was hampering the implementation of the new curriculum, and in particular the need to reduce the workload for practitioners. It was for this reason that the guidance has been replaced on the official DfE website by the Early Years Outcomes, a simple checklist for assessing development.

OUTCOMES FOR PRACTITIONERS

Over the past 12 years, practitioners have been schooled and cajoled with local authority support to adopt whatever recommended Government development guidance is in place, despite the fact that the associated paperwork has meant that in many circumstances there has been less time for practitioners to interact with children. Now that the wealth of guidance has been reviewed and its imposition removed, what should practitioners do and how can they ensure that they are fulfilling the expectations of Ofsted inspection?

Ofsted early years inspection framework

Just as the DfE has made changes to the EYFS, so Ofsted has revised its framework evaluation schedule, and now inspectors are no longer making reference to the Development Matters guidance when they inspect registered early years provision.

Ofsted inspectors are tasked with assessing the quality of the teaching and learning experience for children and its outcomes on their achievements. This means that practitioners are free to choose whatever systems they think useful and effective to implement the EYFS. It is an empowerment that does not come easily, but it ensures that providers have the increased responsibility of evaluating how the skills and knowledge of their staff team can be used to the greatest advantage for children and parents.

Looking for guidance

Early years practitioners, with the confidence to reflect on what they do and why they do it, now have the ability to review what works for them and what support they need to use the curriculum as a tool to facilitate children’s learning.

It is not about ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’, or turning with fear to the advice of local authorities whose advisors may be just as muddled by the reduced reliance on the Development Matters guidance. It is about practitioners thinking about what they know of the children in their care, listening to parents about their expectations and hearing about children’s unique personalities and behaviours, and working out from the moment children join the group what they can and cannot yet do.

It is essential that identifying what children cannot do is not seen as a negative process, because children are naturally hungry for stimulating experiences that stretch their abilities and increase their knowledge and skills. This is the essence of brain development – making connections with new ideas and developing skills is a proactive choice for humans.

A good knowledge of child development is essential for all practitioners, and providers need to ensure that they carefully select staff with the skills and expertise that are required for the job, and provide extra support through reference to a whole range of child development and teaching guidance. Mary Sheridan’s guide has been much used across the world since it was produced in 1956 – now available as From Birth to Five Years: children’s developmental progress, third edition, 2007.

But there have been many other similar guides published over the years that sketch out children’s stages of development from birth to five years. They are all, including Development Matters, useful for reference when monitoring children’s development against expected norms, and therefore for teaching young children across all areas of learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Practitioners need to:

- trust themselves and trust each other, and have confidence in their ability to assess children’s progress according to their age and stage of development
- follow the EYFS Principles – A Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments and Learning and Development – as they are the foundation stones for effective delivery and facilitate learning
- ensure that they are alert to provide a rich curriculum, as embodied in the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning – Playing and Exploring, Active Learning, and Creating and Thinking Critically. These characteristics should be used as a reflective tool, reminding practitioners of children’s entitlement to a broad and well-supported programme of activities and learning
- have high expectations for children’s development and ensure that they are knowledgeable adults themselves. They need to engage children in thinking and discussing all topics, as well as ideas that relate to children’s lives and their natural world
- assess children’s progress, and the easiest and most effective way is to ensure that this is organised to show achievement over time in each area of learning. This will mean that practitioners can prove the impact they have on children’s acquisition of knowledge and skills
- have a good understanding of the early learning goals and plan their programme and children’s individual play plans to ensure that children are working towards achieving those goals
- provide playful, exciting and challenging first-hand learning experiences every day, lots of love and attention, and as much communication with adults and other children as possible to acknowledge their efforts and to stimulate joy in learning.

Practitioners need to trust themselves and trust each other

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