

Fit for purpose

Nursery World spoke to physical development expert Carol Archer about what needs to change within the current EYFS framework to encourage a more research-based approach to children's physical development. By **Charlotte Goddard**



What needs to change within the current EYFS with regards to Physical Development (PD)?

The Government needs to talk to experts in the field. If we are looking at children being ready for school, for example, we need them to be physically ready, in terms of posture, balance and co-ordination. This means infants should have tummy time, crawling, rolling over, pulling up to standing, then doing more vigorous and challenging movements. We know all this is how children become physically ready for a more formal classroom.

Do the PD goals need to be changed?

The goals need to be more accurately defined. Let's get

together a collection of people who are the experts in this area and who are working with children, and talk about what we feel would be useful in terms of assessing the stage of a child's development.

We have to think about the purpose of the early learning goal. For me, it is a tool for teachers to be able to identify the stage of a child's development, and from that be able to plan appropriately for their interests, needs and development. Right now, however, we are expected to judge whether a child is meeting or exceeding the goal, and perhaps that data-collecting distracts us from the child's development.

I see physical development as about vitality of life for a child, something that gives them delight and pleasure, and I think that by

The early learning goals for Physical Development are not useful for practitioners, Carol Archer says

reducing a child to one of three levels, we have lost sight of that. I suggest the reason why some practitioners say the goals are meaningless is because Government requirements have pressurised teachers to reduce children to those levels.

The goals have to be useful for practitioners who work with young children. From my own conversations with colleagues, it is apparent that the goals for Physical Development, and particularly for 'Moving and handling', are rather broad and do not contain enough detail. They need to be broken down and have examples added, such as giving specific types of 'small and large movements' so practitioners know what to look for. This would help them to focus

on what to do next, in terms of developing resources and the environment.

Even in the steps leading to the early learning goal, there are a very limited number of physical movements that are being suggested for children to do. It's my concern that if practitioners have not had specific training, they will look at what is being suggested and feel limited to those particular movements. The steps need to be fuller and more appropriate.

The 'Moving and handling' goal includes mention of pencil grip. Should this be retained?

The inclusion of the ability to handle 'pencils for writing' in 'Moving and handling' is problematic, and even more so when you look at the age-related steps leading to the goal. They are saying that between 30 and 50 months, children should be holding a pencil between thumb and two fingers. That is at two and a half years old. Why are we having that expectation?

I would suggest that if you want children to write, you encourage them to be creative in their ideas, rather than focus on the correct use of the pencil at this age, when children may not have developed the gross and fine motor skills they need for that action. When we wrote *Movers*, a new method of measuring the quality of environment and pedagogy in which young children are encouraged to move and be physically active, we focused on how gross motor skills can support the development of fine motor skills, and that is not really apparent in the EYFS curriculum.

What PD guidance should settings have to follow as part of the EYFS?

The UK's four Chief Medical Officers brought out a report in 2011, which is very helpful but has not been properly publicised. Some people know that children who are walking independently should be physically active for three hours at least every day, but how you implement that is another question.

The CMO based the report on international research and included under-fives for the first time because of the growing concern about their sedentary behaviour

and the impact on their health. It suggests specific movements; for example, for children who are not yet walking they should lie on their backs, on their tummies – the floor is their playground.

If you look at researchers and experts who work in this field, such as Sally Goddard Blythe, director of the Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology, and Bette Lamont, developmental movement expert from Seattle, they are saying the same thing: children need movements that stimulate their nervous system. Running, turning upside down, sliding, spinning until they fall down, hanging on monkey bars – it all stimulates and influences their neurological development and also keeps them healthy and happy and contributes to their well-being.

However, the EYFS Statutory Framework has only an asterisk pointing readers to a footnote which says you 'may' want to refer to the CMO report. I found this shocking – this was the CMO saying they were very concerned about young children becoming obese and giving advice on how we can address this, and the Government did not see fit to say it must be referred to.

The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project is also a fantastic piece of research, and should be prioritised above Ofsted's recent *Bold Beginnings*, which is not research one can rely on. It appears Ofsted's next piece of research will be on physical development, and it will be interesting to see what approach that takes.

At present under the EYFS, settings are not required to have an outdoor area. Should this change?

At the moment new settings can open without an outdoor area, and I am astonished that this is allowed. I know of a setting that not only has no outdoor area, it doesn't even have windows. This should not be permitted – even in prison you are allowed windows! Children learn about their world by moving in it, and how can they do that if they only have an indoor environment cluttered with tables and chairs?

Yes, the current framework does say that providers have to plan daily outdoor activities, but in some areas the places they can take children to



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are limited, as local authority cuts mean playing fields and playgrounds continue to disappear. I used to live in an area with the most fantastic playground with large-scale equipment, and when I visited recently all that has gone: there is an area for very young children that has the smallest plastic slide you could imagine and little else.

One of the most beautiful settings I have ever visited follows a Swedish design, every room has access to the outdoors – it is about to be pulled down for flats. The EYFS framework should make it clearer that children need to be outdoors more. What is their world about if they don't see the sky, or put their hands in the snow?

What kind of training do practitioners need in physical development?

Practitioners need to know what to provide in terms of resources, and to be able to name specific types of movement, as well as knowing when to observe, and when to join children and do things with them. My own research showed settings that received training and follow-up support were more knowledgeable and understood the impact of their interventions and what they needed to provide in the environment to encourage children to move. Those which did not receive training were saying things like 'children move anyway so we don't have to do anything' and 'we just observe and make sure they are safe.'

Training needs to involve all staff including managers and deputies. When newly qualified practitioners arrive at a setting there is so much more training that needs to be done: NVQs do not provide the practical experience that the old NNEB used to do.

One thing practitioners are often not aware of is the cross-curricular stuff, how much physical education can be carried out in other curriculum areas. Children don't divide themselves into curriculum areas, that is something we do.

Carol Archer is a consultant practitioner and co-author, with Prof Iram Siraj, of Encouraging Physical Development Through Movement-Play and Movement Environment Rating Scale (MOVERS) for 2-6-year-olds provision

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MORE INFORMATION

- UK physical activity guidance from the Chief Medical Office, www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-physical-activity-guidelines