

Narrowing the gap in early development

As children grow, we expect them to achieve a range of early skills, and though many in our settings experience delays, it is possible to make a difference by preventing problems before they escalate.



Every year, many young children across the UK experience delays in achieving some of their developmental milestones. Some are failing to meet milestones in areas such as:

- Learning to speak, and understanding language.
- Playing and interacting with their peers at an age-appropriate level.
- Developing the physical coordination and movement required for everyday life skills.

Many children are beginning their life journey with delays, therefore, creating gaps in development between themselves and their peers. There is clearly a need to identify these delays and for early intervention.

Can we narrow the gaps in development?

Yes, we can! As children grow, we expect them to achieve a range of early skills. It is possible to make a difference for children by preventing problems before they escalate. The Itkit is a tool

'I was going to put together a box of activities, but you've just saved my life – everything I need is here!'
Linda Peacock, Jarrow Cross CE Primary School

designed to help practitioners and parents do just that. We want all children to grow up into well-functioning, happy and healthy adults.

The Importance of brain development in the first five years

Research has shown that babies are born with all of their brain cells. How they strengthen and develop those brain cells depends on their early experiences. As they begin to learn and develop, the neurons in their brain cells start to form connections. The more these connections are used, the stronger they become and healthy foundations for learning are established. If, in early life, children do not get the opportunities to develop and strengthen these connections, these essential connections begin to fade away. This is why it is so important to develop early skills through repetition and frequent opportunities to over-learn skills.

Many children come into our nurseries without prior opportunities to build strong connections in the brain and they may show signs of delay in some or all areas of development. It is crucial, therefore, to identify how these delays present themselves and to set out a successful intervention that can help narrow the developmental gap between these children and their peers.

The Early Intervention Toolkit (Itkit) is a complete resource pack that early years practitioners and teachers can use to help identify gaps in development and to provide ideas for robust, systematic intervention.

The Itkit is a tool that supports the early identification of potential gaps in learning and development in young children. Once a gap has been identified it provides a step-by-step intervention programme that teachers and practitioners can implement within their daily





routine in order to help narrow this gap.

The Itkit consists of initial frames of reference for each prime area of learning and development. The initial frames of reference have clear indicators of any possible delay or difficulty in a child's development. A set of intervention cards is provided for each prime area of learning and development that focus on specific skills and provide assessment advice. Each card contains a clear focus and outcome, activities and strategies that increase in difficulty. A list of resources is provided, making use of materials that will be readily available in most settings. All the activities are inclusive and can be carried out within the everyday learning environment using familiar resources and equipment. The intervention record provides practitioners with a systematic method of monitoring the progress of individual children. The cards can also be easily shared with teaching assistants and parents.

This practical, easy-to-implement programme

will support practitioners to meet the needs of those children who are not meeting age-related expectations in their Communication and Language, Physical, or Personal, Social and Emotional development. The purpose of the programme is to improve children's development across these three prime areas, which are the foundations to learning.

With the right early intervention, children make better progress. The longer-term impacts are minimised and many children can even catch up.

Useful resources:

Examples of the Itkit frames of reference and intervention cards are available to download free on the LTC website: <http://learningandtraining.co.uk/itkit/>

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Personal, Social and Emotional Development SELF-CONFIDENCE and SELF-AWARENESS

Children need to be confident to try new things and say why they like some activities more than others. They should be confident enough to speak in a familiar group and talk about their ideas. They should be able to select their resources and say whether they need help or not.

SELF-CONFIDENCE and SELF-AWARENESS	Observed Behaviour	Intervention Cards
Has continued difficulty separating from parent or carer.		Orange 8
Appears quiet, withdrawn and nervous.		Orange 9
Lacks confidence in speaking to adults and/or other children.		Orange 10
Needs support or encouragement to select activities independently.		Orange 11
Has predictable routines, always plays in the same areas, is reluctant to try new activities or 'have a go' with different resources.		Orange 12

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Physical Development Moving and Handling

The activities below are graded according to difficulty. Begin with the activity described in step 1. Move on to the next step only when the child shows confidence and success. You may find that the child progresses through the first steps quickly. It is important to provide opportunities for the child to practice the activities daily. This will maximise their development and secure the memory of specific movements.

Card 1

Observed Behaviour	• Walks awkwardly or frequently trips. • Prefers to run rather than walk.
Focus	• To improve balance and stability. • To slow gross movements.
Activity/Strategy	To walk along a straight line with controlled movements. Step 1 The adult designs a straight pathway using two strips of masking tape about 20cm apart within the indoor or outdoor environment. The adult asks the child to walk between the lines. The child is encouraged to stay on the pathway, walking between the two strips of tape. Initially the child may need some help. Remember to make it a game, use the child's interests. Step 2 The adult supports the child to walk backwards along the pathway between the lines. Step 3 The adult reduces the width of the pathway. Step 4 - The Challenge Design a curved pathway as a route for the child to follow either within the indoor or outdoor environment. <i>Continued overleaf</i>

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