

In the know

In the third part of a series on the progress check, *Sue Chambers* looks at the importance of robust observation, assessment and planning to meet the needs of your children

PHOTOGRAPH AT NOAH'S ARK NURSERY, LONDON BY JUSTIN THOMAS

The Progress Check at Age Two requires settings to build a picture of a child's development in the three Prime areas, to inform both parents' and practitioners' understanding of the child's progress and 'next steps' for learning. The accuracy of the picture depends on well-trained practitioners and a robust system of observation, assessment and planning.

The check includes a short written summary of a child's development in the Prime areas, but beyond that, it is up to the practitioner to decide what should be included.

Completing the summary does not mean setting up activities to 'test' children. Rather, the check should be informed by a robust system of observation, and these observations should form the basis of planning for what a child wants and needs.

Nor should the check be seen as 'an end of year exam'. It is a summative assessment of a child's development at a given time. So, practitioners and parents should remember that

children develop at their own rates, and in their own ways. The statements within *Development Matters*, and their order, should not be taken as necessary steps for a child. They should not be used as checklists.

The check is there to identify a child's strengths and any areas where the child's progress is less than expected. If there are significant emerging concerns or an identified special educational need or disability, you should develop a plan to support the child's learning and development, involving other professionals as appropriate.

OBSERVATION AND ASSESSMENT

Observation-based planning and assessment lies at the heart of good practice within the Early Years Foundation Stage. Where a two-year-old has attended a setting for a considerable amount of time and has experienced an effective transition from the baby room the check should be easy for staff to complete, as they will have gathered much information about

the child and built up strong relationships with the parents.

However, reliable observations and assessments depend on practitioners understanding the particular characteristics of this age group. The second and third years of life are marked by rapid changes in physical, cognitive, personality and social characteristics.

Two-year-olds still play alongside other children, can be shy and clinging and can be very affectionate and love cuddles. They are beginning to be independent and often want to do things for themselves. They can be jealous about adult attention, possessive, demanding, easily frustrated and sit still and concentrate for no more than a few minutes. They can need considerable time to change activities and can show aggression without understanding the consequences of such actions.

At around two years, their vocabulary expands rapidly and they begin to form short sentences, but are capable of frequent tantrums, which are often a result of their inability to express themselves clearly.

CASE STUDY: CLARA

Clara was two years and three months old when she started in the nursery. The local authority provided no information beforehand about the family's circumstances. At the initial meeting, Clara's mother explained that she and her two children were living in temporary accommodation and had been victims of domestic violence. A social worker was involved.

Though guarded, it seemed that the mother had had negative experiences of school, and had never worked. The

whole family, including parents and grandparents, also seemed to have been disconnected from the community.

The manager realised that building the relationship with mum would be key to Clara's success in the nursery, so appointed Clara an experienced, confident and mature Key Person to work with her and her mother.

The nursery has eight full-time equivalent funded two-year-olds within the group of 16. Each key person has only four children, and if a child needs

a high level of one-to-one support that number is cut to two. Clara was offered a place five days per week from 1-4pm.

The normal three-day settling-in process had to be extended to five days before Clara would settle and the Key Person used the additional time to build up a relationship with Clara's mother.

However, Clara's attendance was initially erratic, largely because the damp at home caused her eczema to flare up badly. Like many vulnerable families, Clara's mother was

overwhelmed by problems, leaving her with little energy to fully address her children's problems. The nursery, therefore, helped her with all sorts of practical issues, such as applying for more suitable housing.

When Clara started nursery, her speech and language skills were much delayed. She still drank from a feeding bottle and used a dummy at home. She had poor play skills, which often ended in conflict with the other children. A baseline screening assessment was



CHALLENGES

There are also particular challenges in building an accurate picture of children on the funded programme, as these two-year-olds may have particular needs, may attend for only 15 hours a week (perhaps irregularly) and may have attended the setting for only a few months before the check needs to be carried out (see box).

It is worth looking at the experiences of the pilot settings offering funded places for two-year-olds – though bear in mind that the pilot project targeted the most disadvantaged of children and that the overall profile will change as the scheme rolls out, with eligibility defined more by family income than special needs.

The NatCen report evaluating the two-year-old pilot (2010) noted that providers commented on the particular needs of the children, principally in: speech and language, behaviour, social skills and relationships.

Practitioners found that children needed additional support to develop independence in toilet training, dressing and mealtimes. They observed that children required one-to-one help to enable them to settle.

They reported that some children found boundaries difficult around accepted behaviour and required high levels of support to develop their concentration. Practitioners also found that some children exhibited aggressive or disruptive behaviour

An enabling environment is vital for building a reliable picture of twos' requirements

or a fear of loud noises linked to their experiences of domestic violence. Some children had identified special educational needs or complex health needs.

Given the potential needs of some two-year-olds, it is essential that any observation and assessment be carried out by skilled practitioners who understand:

- all aspects of child development
- brain development
- the characteristics of two-year-olds, and
- the needs and wants of the particular child.

Vital, too, is that you are alert to the potential needs of children while avoiding taking a deficit view of funded two-year-olds. Just because a child is eligible for a funded place does not necessarily mean they have delayed development or have not received rich learning experiences.

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

You can only build a reliable picture of a two-year-old and meet the wider aims of the progress check by creating an 'enabling environment' that is emotionally supportive, planned around the child's current wants and needs and takes account of the 'next steps' in their learning.

The NatCen report notes, 'The phase one pilot evaluation found that only a minority of settings were providing care of sufficient quality to have a positive influence on children's social and cognitive outcome.'

However, it also notes, practitioners stated that with appropriate time, training and support they were ➤

carried out at six weeks, followed by a discussion with her mother to talk about Clara's development. Suggestions were given to mum to help her to set boundaries and ideas on how she could help Clara's language development.

There were informal daily discussions between the Key Person and Clara's mother. These served to build the relationship between home and nursery and also ensure that learning experiences offered were based on Clara's current interests.

The issues that needed to be addressed were:

PSED: Managing feelings and behaviour

C&L: Listening and attention.

The Key Person implemented a speech and language programme on a daily basis, which included one-to-one and small group support to build Clara's attention and listening skills. Clara also spent one-to-one time with her Key Person or with a small group in the sensory room, which gave her a calm environment to help her to share and take turns.

Lots of effort was needed to help her to understand boundaries. She loved sand and water play so those experiences were used as a basis. Wide use was made of consistent routines and behaviour management. A visual timetable was invaluable.

The progress check was carried out when Clara was 2.5 years, sadly with no input from a health visitor. As Clara had only attended the nursery for a short time, she was still not reaching her developmental norms in the areas that were

a cause for concern, so the results were a 'work in progress'.

Use of assessment based on observations and discussions with Clara's mother ensured that Clara's needs had been identified early and addressed. The official progress check meeting to discuss Clara's development was not therefore an event viewed by Clara's mother as something formal or frightening.

Ongoing interventions ensured that by three years Clara had caught up and was on track in her development.

able to help the children to settle. They described 'noticeable differences in children's confidence and enthusiasm during their time at the setting, as they benefited from stimulation that may have been lacking at home. They reported experiences new to the children, such as playing outside in a garden or visiting a library, using new toys or equipment, and simply interacting with other children and adults'. Settings should, therefore, consider the following.

INFORMATION

Only through discussions with parents and a good system of observation, assessment and planning will you understand the child's needs and stage of development.

It is critical to find out as much as possible about a child's needs and experiences before they start. Ideally, you will have been passed information from other agencies that may be involved with the family to help you build as full a picture as possible of the needs of the child and the family. However, practitioners from the pilot reported that they were usually told nothing about a family's circumstances before the child started.

During that first meeting, you should observe the child in their own home or in your setting to see if there are any clues that you can detect about the child's relationship with their parent/carer. The information gained will form the basis of your planning. You should, therefore, find out about the child's interests, eating and sleeping patterns and whether:

- the child has ever been separated from their parent/carer before
- they are an only child
- the parents or carers have any concerns about development
- the child has any identified additional or medical needs

- any other agencies are involved with the family.

The diagram below illustrates the information-gathering process.

SETTLING IN

According to Government figures, only 37 per cent of two-year-olds from the poorest 40 per cent of families access any formal early education, so a thought out and well-organised settling-in process is essential.

It is critical to observe how a child settles in the first couple of weeks to get a real understanding of the level of need, to identify any areas where additional strategies and support may be needed. This will inform future planning and provide information to share with the child's parents, colleagues and, if appropriate, the special educational needs co-ordinator.

It will also create a baseline assessment that will allow you to measure the child's progress. You may need to develop Individual Education Plans to focus on areas of need with achievable targets. Those, combined with your normal system of observations of achievements, difficulties and interests, will allow you to regularly update your trackers that can be shared with parents and carers.

Given time, patience and understanding, even the most challenging child will learn what is expected of them and settle in their environment.

STAFF DEPLOYMENT

The Wave Trust (2013) states that 'the quality of settings very much depends on the quality of training and development support available to, and undertaken by, those staff working in them'. Staff should, therefore, have highly developed core skills:

- to interact with infants and toddlers and offer high-quality support for speech, language and



MORE INFORMATION

- *Conception to Age Two: the age of opportunity*, addendum to Government's *Supporting Families in the Foundation Years*, The Wave Trust (2013)
- *Early Education Pilot for Two-year-old Children Evaluation*, by R Smith, S Purdon, V Schneider, I La Valle, I Woolny, R Owen, C Bryson, S Mathers, K Sylva, E Lloyd (2009)
- Penny Tassoni's series for *Nursery World* on working with two-year-olds. The latest article is at www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1140343/learning-development-olds-speak
- *Progress Matters*, National Strategies (2009), www.foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/progress-matters.pdf
- *Rolling out Free Early Education for Disadvantaged Two-Year-Olds: an implementation study for local authorities and providers* by J Gibb, H Jelicic, I La Valle, S Gowland, R Kinsella, P Jessiman, R Ormston, National Centre for Social Research (2010)
- 'Two-year-olds: training – close your skills gap' by Annette Rawstrone in *Nursery World*, 1 July 2013

communication skills, perhaps using basic Makaton

- to form empathetic relationships with parents in a professional capacity
- They should also have an understanding of:
- how to help children to manage their feelings
 - speech and language development
 - child development and strategies to put in place if children are not meeting developmental milestones
 - attachment theory – how it relates to key relationships, how to build warm, responsive and sustained relationships with young children confirmed by visual, auditory and physical contact, and the importance of continuity and consistency in the Key Person relationship.

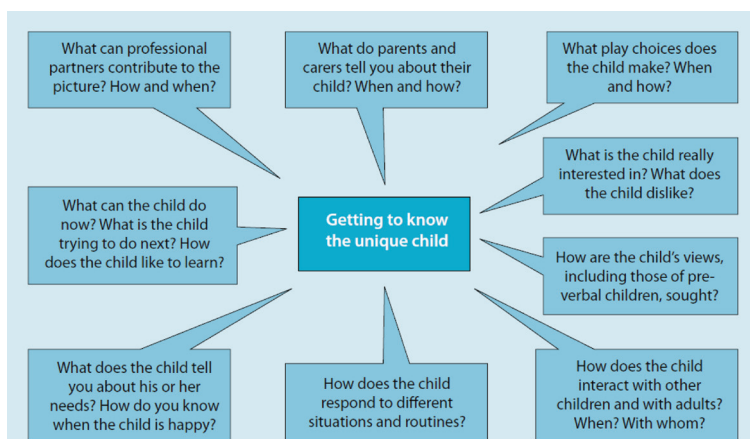
TIME

- Ensure you have plenty of time to talk with parents each day to build a very important relationship. Plan time during the induction and settling-in period to talk about the routines and nursery ethos.
- Plan in time for plenty of one-to-one support for the child, especially in the early days with lots of talking and listening.

PLANNING AROUND THE PRIME AREAS

- Remember that all two-year-olds need space indoors and outdoors – especially those that have had limited opportunities and experience of the world.
- At the beginning, limit choices of equipment. Introduce new experiences gradually and offer support to help the child to see the potential of different learning experiences.
- Remember that every experience you offer is likely to be new. Try to build on the child's interests.
- Use every opportunity to develop the child's language skills with the help of Makaton and visual timetables.
- Remember that all two-year-olds have limited concentration, so don't plan activities that require sitting still for very long.
- Be patient. It is going the child to take a while to understand the expected boundaries and to learn to know and trust you. ■

Sue Chambers is a senior LEYF associate



The information-gathering process has many different components