

Learning comes naturally to young children. Every day they grow physically, emotionally, socially and mentally, developing their intelligence and understanding about the world around them. Parents, carers and other family members are a child's first teachers and play a vital role in helping young children learn.

Children learn through their senses, by tasting, touching, seeing, hearing and smelling.

They learn language and behaviour by watching and copying people close to them. They develop an ability to distinguish different shapes through touching, exploring and looking at shapes and textures of objects. Later, this helps them to learn to do things, such as reading, when they identify the different shapes of letters. Above all, they learn through playing.

How to support a young child's learning and development

- Talk and sing to your child. It will help them develop their memory of sounds and words.
- Be guided by your child: watch and notice what they can do and encourage them gradually to try new things.
- Remember that each child grows and develops at their own pace. Avoid comparisons with other children and try not to put a child under pressure to do anything they are not ready to do.
- Talk about the pictures in books and read to your child. Encourage them by having books and magazines in the house. Let them see family members reading.

- Point to words and say them out loud as you travel together– look at road signs, names of shops and place names.
- Feed your child's natural curiosity. Give them a variety of safe and interesting objects to explore.
- Play with your child. It's an opportunity to share in, and enjoy, their discoveries and achievements.
- Try to give your child somewhere to enjoy physical movement and games – running, jumping, swinging, sliding, skipping, climbing and playing ball games. Open spaces like parks and playgrounds are ideal.
- Could you join a library or other local group? Libraries have lots of information about services and activities for families. They are also good places to meet other parents and help your child develop the social skills they will need in school.
- Enjoy everyday activities together. They are opportunities to talk about things, name them and identify words.

Learning through play

Play is one of the main ways in which your child will learn. It helps your child build self-worth and feel good about themselves by giving them a sense of their own abilities.

Because it's fun, you will see that your child often becomes absorbed in what they are doing, and this will help them develop concentration skills. You don't need to buy lots of expensive toys; a range of playthings will help learning.

- Sand and water play can be an early introduction to science and maths – for example learning that water is fluid and can be measured in different sized containers.
- Playing with dough, drawing and painting pictures, dressing up and playing with dolls can encourage creativity, imagination, and expression of feelings.
- Stickers encourage your child to appreciate colour and shape. Safety scissors and glue help your child develop fine motor skills. Always make sure an adult is present if a young child is using scissors or glue.
- Building blocks, jigsaws and shape sorters can help with recognising different shapes and sizes, putting things in order, developing logical thought and fine hand movements like picking objects up and fitting things together.
- Physical activities, playing ball games, dancing, running and climbing help develop body movement, strength, flexibility and co-ordination - and tire children out!
- Games help with learning to take turns, sharing and mixing with others.
- Singing, playing simple instruments and music help to develop rhythm, listening and hearing.
- Playing at helping you cook, as long as they are carefully supervised, encourages children to try different foods, and teaches them about nutrition and healthy eating.

Always supervise young children at play

Helping a child develop confidence and self-worth

One of the best ways to help children feel valued is to listen to them and let them know when they are doing something well. Everyone responds well to praise!

Try to avoid doing everything for your child. Let them experiment and work things out for themselves, even if it means they take longer and make mistakes, such as putting clothes on the wrong way round or their shoes on the wrong feet. This helps them develop independence and confidence in their own abilities.

As your child develops, they need to be shown clear boundaries – to be told and shown what behaviour is and is not acceptable and why. It's tempting to not disturb children when they are quiet and occupied. But sometimes, children may develop a pattern of being naughty if they get attention only when they are mischievous. Try to let them know when they are doing things well, and at other times aim for a firm and gentle approach.

If using a childminder, make sure your childminder uses this approach too, as well as providing a stimulating environment for your child to play in.

You can find more information about services for families and children, including services which help families learn and play together, at www.devonfsd.info