The Seeds of Confidence

Summary of contents

• Confidence is a catalyst in supporting early personal growth. The young child develops confidence through becoming aware of herself as a separate and worthwhile person, as well as having a realistic view of what she can achieve.
• Children gain their self-esteem initially from the love and recognition that they receive from their family and other significant people in their lives including their practitioner who is their key person.
• When they move into an early years setting they will gain confidence if their questions and comments are understood, their interests are recognised and strengthened as schemes of thought. They also become aware of themselves, what they are capable of doing and what is approved behaviour.
• Children’s self-esteem and self-knowledge are closely linked to the ways in which they see themselves as learners. This leads them to show either ‘mastery’ or ‘helpless’ patterns of behaviour. Their success as learners is dependent on them feeling secure and also having opportunities to experiment in play contexts and try things out for themselves.

Early childhood is such a momentous time of life. Gazing at a newborn baby we can never be sure of how she will develop – what potential she has within her – but we know that there is everything to play for. And watching her grow up it is impossible to separate the different strands of development, as they are all inter-related. Increased physical movement leads to possibilities for growing independence which in turn means that the baby extends her horizons, and strengthens her curiosity to discover more. But studies strongly suggest that the catalyst for these amazing achievements is the child’s growing confidence (1, 2, 3).

Confidence is a characteristic valued by all and one that parents most want for their children. We may hear of parents who deliberately send their young chil-
dren to certain settings or schools or arrange for them to join clubs ‘in order to
give them confidence’. Many parents see that the prime role of care and edu-
cation is to help children to acquire social skills and become confident before
entering mainstream school. The confident person is well equipped to deal
with life, whether in school or work or in social situations. Conversely, under-
confident people find coping with these aspects of life often difficult and
painful. Above all, truly confident people are comfortable with themselves and
have insights into their own strengths and weaknesses. This distinguishes them
from over-confident people, who although they think well of themselves may
lack self-insight and have a false sense of optimism of what they can achieve.
In a world that demands so much of them, children do need to become confi-
dent from an early age. It is necessary for their early success in life and also for
the future. In a 60-year study of more than a thousand men and women of high
intelligence followed through from childhood to retirement, those most confi-
dent in their early years were most successful as their careers unfolded (4).
What then is required to achieve this precious personal attribute, and how can
we help young children to develop it?

An interesting question is whether confidence is an inherited trait and whether
some babies are blessed with it at birth. To some extent this might be true: very
small babies show clear signs of personality traits; for example, sociable and shy
behaviours. However, being outgoing does not necessarily link with a good
level of confidence, while low key, seemingly unassuming persons can be qui-
ety sure of themselves. So as Lillian Katz suggests, perhaps it is not what we are
born with that counts so much but what we are allowed to do and who we are
encouraged to be (5). Thus young children’s levels of confidence are coloured
by their early experiences and successes and failures, the thoughts they have
about themselves and other people’s reactions to them. Most people would
admit that their confidence ebbs and flows according to the people they are
with and the situations demanded of them. However, a person’s confidence is
linked closely to three factors. These are: becoming aware of oneself (self-con-
cept); developing a view of oneself, either positive or negative (self-esteem); and
getting to know about one’s strengths and weaknesses (self-knowledge).
Children become aware of the first two at a very early stage of their lives; their
experiences in the nursery will influence powerfully all three factors.

BECOMING AWARE OF ONESELF

The Early Years Foundation Stage recognises that ‘being acknowledged and
affirmed by important people in their lives leads to children gaining confidence
and inner strength through secure attachments with these people’ (6).

We begin to recognise ourselves from early on. After about 18 months a toddler
has a pretty good idea that the reflection shown in a mirror is a representation
of herself. Before that even, babies will build a picture of themselves from the
way in which they are regarded and treated, particularly by those people who
are closest to them. Young babies start to form this picture from their mothers, whose loving acceptance of them is the first signal that they are a person who matters. Rosemary Roberts describes this beautifully:

The mother’s face and body are like a mirror to the baby. This very early mirroring process which can reflect the mother’s acceptance, forms the basis of the baby’s self-concept; the mother’s responses are the first ‘brush strokes’ for the developing picture (7).

This image of oneself as a distinct person is crucial in order to establish a sense of identity; initially it is most strongly established through ongoing contact with one person (see also Chapters 2 and 3). Dorothy Selleck argues that only the presence of a parent or committed regular key person which is now a requirement for every child in an early years setting can provide the continuity, attention and sensuous pleasure that a baby needs to make sense of his experiences and set in motion the process of mental development (8). For children under two, particularly those who are placed in day care, their key person offers an essential warm attachment and the assurance that, despite being one of a number, that baby or toddler is special and unique. Young babies who have been institutionalised from birth and who lack regular contact with one carer may fail to recognise the ‘brush strokes’ described by Roberts. In certain circumstances a person’s sense of ‘self’ can be eroded – for example, adults imprisoned in conditions of harsh confinement. Terry Waite wrote movingly of his long period in captivity and of the times when he wondered who he was: ‘How I yearn with a childish, selfish longing to be understood and cared for. I am frightened. Frightened that, in growing up, my identity may slip away’ (9).

Attachment relationships are discussed in Chapter 4 where they are linked to children’s emotional development. However, sound attachments are fundamental to a child’s overall healthy development; a baby will gain confidence in her identity when a few loving and significant people recognise and respond to her. Maria Robinson describes this process as attunement. She stresses the importance of learning to interpret the baby’s signals and suggests that the parent is then able to attune their own responses to those of the baby. This responsive affirmation helps the child learn more about mum or dad and strengthens belief in himself (10). As the toddler develops into the pre-school years, other people contribute to a broader view of her identity. Through their different behaviours these people will help a child to know who she is. For example, Alison knows that she is dad’s little daughter and she makes him laugh; her baby brother’s loving older sister when she cuddles him and gives him his bottle; her older brother’s noisy little sister when she dances and sings to his records; and Alison the artist at nursery when her teacher admires her paintings. By becoming aware of the way in which others view us we build up a composite picture of ourselves. We also learn to behave in character; we get a picture of how other people regard us and then adapt our behaviour to fit this picture. Because of their immaturity, young children are very open to the opinions and views of other more experienced adults, particularly those adults who are familiar and loved, members of their immediate family, and later those oth-
ers who care for and work with them. Children who feel that they belong are likely to recognise themselves as distinctive.

Figure 1.1 Yuichi’s family provide her with a sense of personal continuity

The stable family provides the child with a sense of personal continuity. Young children love to hear stories of when they were babies or to share recall of past family events. They are also keen to share and listen to predictions of ‘what will happen when you are a big girl’. These shared experiences and concerns help young children to start to have a sense of self within the larger family.

The family, then, has a powerful effect on each child’s sense of identity, but when the child moves to an early years setting the practitioners share this responsibility.

SELF-ESTEEM

When a child establishes her identity she is simply becoming aware of how others see her. Once we talk about self-esteem we start to place a value on that identity. Children do not gain a clear view of their self-worth until they are around six years of age but their early experiences within the family and in early years settings provide the basis for them to make a judgement about themselves. Self-esteem is not fixed; it can change according to the people we are with and the situations that we find ourselves in. Alison’s self-esteem is mainly secure as she recognises that she is valued in different ways by her
father, by her baby brother, and in the nursery. She has a lower esteem though when she is with her older brother, who makes it clear that she is often intrusive and a nuisance to him. So the views of others not only help a young child to recognise herself as a person who is seen in different ways; they also contribute to the regard she has for herself. And again it is the people who are closest to the child and who have an emotional link who will have the most profound effect on her self-esteem. These are described as the ‘significant others’ and they include the family and primary carers, the key person and other practitioners who have early contacts with the child.

One of the most important gifts we can offer young children is a positive view of themselves. Without this gift they will flounder throughout life and be constantly seeking reassurance from others as they cannot seek it from within. However, as Siraj-Blatchford points out, positive self-esteem depends on whether children feel that others accept them and see them as competent and worthwhile (11).

Case study

Four-year-old Eva had poor eyesight and after three weeks in her new reception class she was prescribed spectacles to wear. Eva was extremely self-conscious about her glasses and that same day was found weeping in the cloakroom after one child asked her why she was wearing ‘masks over her eyes’. From that moment all efforts from her teacher Anna and later her mum could not persuade Eva to wear her spectacles in school although she clearly had visual difficulties with mark making and when looking at picture books.

Four days later, Anna arrived in school wearing a pair of quite ornate spectacles (with clear glass in the lens as she had perfect sight). As she had anticipated the children noticed the difference and this interest gave Anna the opportunity she wanted. At story time she asked the children what they thought about her new purchase – all thought them very pretty. Anna stressed how pleased she was with the spectacles and how well she could see with them. She involved other children in the class who also wore glasses and said how smart they looked. Eva said nothing but was clearly listening. The following day she hesitantly came into the class wearing her spectacles. Anna complimented Eva on her appearance and Eva was delighted to be able to identify and describe some fine detail in the picture story book they shared in a group.

Comment

Having to wear spectacles severely affected Eva’s self-esteem – she felt vulnerable and different. Anna’s sensitive move to show wearing spectacles in a positive light and to model this herself was clearly effective. Eva resumed wearing the spectacles because she no longer felt different, but was finally persuaded of their benefit when she realised that she could now see things more easily.
When children constantly demand attention or boast about their achievements this is sometimes wrongly interpreted as an over-developed self-esteem. However, we should recognise that self-esteem is not conceit and this type of behaviour is more likely to reflect a lack of self-regard and a basic insecurity. In an article which stresses that self-esteem is basic to a healthy life, Murray White looks at the possible problems in later school life arising from its lack:

If teachers examine what causes bullying and other chronic misbehaviours – the showing off, the fighting and the failure which some children have adopted – they will discover that low self-esteem is at the root of it. These children behave as they do because of strong feelings of inadequacy and internal blame, a belief that they do not possess the ability or intelligence to succeed (12).

SELF-ESTEEM IN THE EARLY YEARS SETTING

The value that we place on ourselves is also affected by how secure we feel. Both adults and children are usually secure with people they know but also when they are in familiar situations. When we start a new job or a new course of learning, most of us feel very vulnerable being placed in the position of a novice. We do not even know where to get a cup of coffee, let alone really understand aspects of new work or how others will work with us.

Studies of young children at home show them to be comfortable and in control with mum or the main carer safely in sight. A one-year-old is usually wary of anyone who comes between her and her mum and will use her parent as a secure base to explore wider territory (13). Tizard and Hughes’ well-known study of four-year-old girls conversing and questioning with their mothers gives a picture of children in a situation when they feel they are on sure territory (14). In nearly all families young children recognise that there are loving adults who know them and care about them. This knowledge in itself helps the child to feel secure.

When starting in an early years setting the young child faces new experiences including developing contact with people who are unknown to her and to whom she is unknown. She is placed in a similar position to an adult starting a new job but has much less experience of life to support her. Consequently the move to a group setting can be a momentous event in the child’s life which for some can result in considerable self-doubt; even the most confident child can find this move intimidating. When they start school, children’s expectations of what it will be like often does not match the reality.

Those with older siblings or those who play with pupils from school may have acquired some understanding of school values and systems vicariously. Within role play they may have developed ‘script knowledge’ (Gura, 1996:37) while they were exploring make-believe school … However, for the first-born and for many others, school will be a completely new experience. In presenting their picture of school, parents, siblings and friends shape children’s thinking but on arriving at school children may find the reality to be different (15.)
The setting plays a key role in maintaining each child’s self-esteem when they are learning to work and play in a different environment from home. The size and type of setting can make a difference and there is specific evidence that moving into a reception class at four years is stressful. Gill Barratt’s classic study of children starting school in a reception class highlighted some feelings experienced by these new young entrants. Through looking at photographs and in discussion children described feeling scared, fearful of getting things ‘wrong’ and not knowing what to do. Most of these feelings can be linked to not feeling in control. Barrett’s work showed that, partly because of the way the pupil role is understood by young children, usually based on what they have heard from parents, other children and through television, some adopt a passive attitude, are reluctant to take risks in their learning and are anxious about their inadequacies being revealed (16).

Both of these studies show young children facing tremendous demands, both emotional and intellectual. The fear of being wrong is a major inhibitor. Barrett suggested that too often in mainstream schools there was still emphasis placed on children needing to do things correctly and that children do need to feel that it is safe and acceptable not to know something. Lately there have been genuine moves by schools to recognise the needs of their youngest children. Many settings and schools are now working closely together to ensure a gentle and phased transition into a reception class and from reception into Year 1. Settings and schools are increasingly beginning to tailormake a transition to meet each child’s needs, rather than expecting every child to fit in to one size of provision. Despite this, too often staffing ratios in reception classes remain inadequate. It is essential that, when children are newcomers to a setting, they are able to have easy access to an adult who will introduce them to the multiplicity of new experiences gently and informally and interpret new requirements for them. The close involvement of parents in this process allows children to feel emotionally supported while they learn.

The practitioner also knows that a child’s self-esteem can be fragile. Self-esteem is not constant for any of us. As adults we can have a very positive view of ourselves in one circumstance only to have it knocked down in another. Given a new manager who makes unreasonable demands at work, an important project which proves to be unsuccessful or a failed relationship in our personal lives, our self-esteem can dip. A mature person with a sound self-concept should be able to cope with this over time and indeed to seek out self-affirming situations in which she can succeed.

A young child does not have this ability. Her self-esteem is totally dependent on the people who matter to her and the situations that they provide. A young child will only really value herself fully if she knows that she has the unconditional love of a parent or carer. This knowledge is absolutely critical, and if for some reason it hasn’t been acquired during the early years at home then the nursery teacher has a heavy responsibility to demonstrate that love and care.
Proper caring for a child means knowing about her, including how she thinks and what interests her. In order to feel comfortable and ‘at home’ in a nursery, a child needs to know that she is known and that her behaviour is understood. The first principle of the Early Years Foundation Stage emphasises that every child is unique, with her own particular personality and characteristics. Practitioners therefore need to have ways of tuning in to what lies behind children’s thoughts, comments and actions. Chapter 2 deals with the importance of closely listening to children.

Another way in is for practitioners to understand about what Piaget termed young children’s ‘schemes of thought’. Piaget claimed that children’s patterns of thought are evident from babyhood in their early physical and sensory actions. These schemes are strengthened as children repeat their actions; through interactions with others they begin to make connections in their thoughts and so recognise cause and effect. Children’s schemes or ‘schema’ are dealt with extensively in other literature (17, 18, 19).

Some children have one schema while others seem to have a number. Although around 36 schemes have been identified, the staff at the Pen Green Centre of Excellence for Under Fives identified the most common ones. These are those linked to straight lines (trajectory); circles (rotation); joining things (connection); covering things (enveloping); and moving things from one place to another (transporting) (20). Young children will all demonstrate abiding interests in these patterns of movement through what they do and how they behave. We will see this unfold particularly clearly when children play with open-ended materials. In a beautifully illustrated booklet published by Community Playthings, open-ended is defined as ‘not having a fixed answer; unrestricted; allowing for future change’ (21). When using these materials children create their own scenarios and are in charge of their learning. The booklet further suggests that these powers are at risk when children are fed a diet of ready made entertainment, a heavy emphasis on use of commercial equipment and access to electronic activities. If we believe that young children learn initially through first-hand sensory experiences ‘a wealth of open-ended play – with simple materials – can set children on the road to being confident individuals with a lively interest in life’ (22).

Case study

Daisy at 15 months was introduced to heuristic play. (providing her with an array of natural materials and containers which Daisy has time to explore and investigate freely). Her key person observed her on three separate occasions engaged in the following:

• wrapping her teddy up, placing him in a bag and carrying the bag around with her

Continued
In order to keep in tune with children, practitioners need to listen and observe closely and then often take an imaginative leap into the child’s mind to make sense of their meanings. While this has always been good practice the Early Years Foundation Stage now makes it a requirement that all provision we make for babies and young children is based on our close observations of what they do on a day-to-day basis (23).

Although the child must be sure that she is loved at all times, part of the process of caring is also to help shape her behaviour (see also Chapter 6). A problem can arise where the expectations for behaviour differ from home to the setting. It may be that the basis for praise at home is ‘to stand up for yourself and hit them back’, or ‘you make sure that you are the best in the class’. These are powerful messages for young children from people who are very important to them; all the practitioners can do is to try to modify these messages by presenting an alternative view and trying to provide the conditions in the nursery to demonstrate them. Hopefully, then, over a period of time a child learns to use language instead of fists to maintain her rights and to understand that every single person in the nursery community can be ‘best’ at something. Again a confident, bright, creative four-year-old whose parents have encouraged her non-contingent thinking and activity may find it difficult to conform in any group setting; she will certainly find life extremely hard in a nursery which puts very heavy emphasis on a narrow definition of correct behaviour. She risks being herself and receiving constant reprimand for her responses, or complying with requirements and feeling herself to be in an alien and unreasonable environment in which she has no opportunity to show her strengths. In this situation self-belief will ebb away unless a watchful practitioner understands the behaviour that has been encouraged at home and is prepared to be flexible with the requirements in the setting.

Having a positive esteem for oneself is dependent on having a clear view of who you are; this is often difficult for children from minority groups. Tina Bruce points out that too often people from minorities are stereotyped into an identity with which they are not comfortable (24).

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- collecting fir cones and placing them in boxes, taking great care to replace the lid of each box
- attaching dolly pegs in a circle to the lid of a circular wooden container
- covering small play characters with shawls and blankets which were placed nearby
- repeatedly attempting to attach a necklace around her neck.

**Comment**

Sue, Daisy’s key person, felt that she had some secure evidence to suggest that Daisy had an enveloping schema. She supported this by providing more drapes and bags and moving a large cardboard box into the area which Daisy used as a ‘hidey hole’.

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Moving a child who does not appear to be thriving during the early years at school is not to be considered lightly. Although, this was eventually seen as the right decision for James. Andrew Pollard, in his social study of five children starting school, describes James who stayed at the local state primary school for the first two years of his school career, after which his parents transferred him to an independent school. James found the move to infant school difficult and his self-esteem suffered. James was not accepted by other children although he badly wanted friends; overall he could not adapt to the robust climate of school life. His teachers supported him, but perceived him as cautious and ‘nervy’. There was a clash of culture between the school and the parents who were strongly supportive of James, had high academic aspirations for him and provided home tuition for him. It was apparent that James could not meet the requirements of both school and home. When he started to be influenced by the other children at the end of the reception year, the parents became alarmed and described his new behaviour as ‘rude’ and ‘cheeky’. Pollard suggests that this little boy’s unhappiness sprang from the poor home/school communications. The parents had always aspired for James to move to an independent school where more formal teaching methods were seen to be in keeping with what they wanted for their son. Most importantly, James subsequently flourished in his new school, in his learning and social life (25).

So, optimal conditions to promote children’s self-esteem include care and respect for their ways of thinking and appreciation of difference, which enables
children coming from different backgrounds and cultures to experience feeling good about themselves. Self-esteem is only likely to be fostered in situations where all aspects of all children are esteemed, including their gender, race, ability, culture and language.

**SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

When people are acknowledged and respected, this contributes to the regard they have for themselves. However, this must also go hand in hand with them getting to know themselves. As young children develop they start to learn about themselves and what they can do; they begin to recognise those things that they find easy and where they need help and support.

Initially, however, children have limited self-insight and they look to others to provide information. At first, young children are dependent on the adults around them to gain a view of their strengths and weaknesses. Nevertheless, although guidance should be given and boundaries for behaviour established, ultimately, as Pat Gura suggests, the main aim must be to help children develop a sense of control over their lives and build their own aspirations (26).

The way in which an early years programme is organised reflects the practitioners’ beliefs about the degree of responsibility to give children and the importance of helping them to get to know themselves. Studies have shown that children can spend their time in either controlling or informational environments. In a controlling environment the emphasis is very much on the adults being in charge, and requiring children to comply. An informational environment will encourage children to take responsibility for themselves by learning to plan their work, decide what resources to use and then have a part in assessing what has been achieved (27).

In a setting where adults control, children can only respond. An informational environment will allow children to make and learn from mistakes, discover the best way of doing things and learn how to make decisions. Evidence from two longitudinal studies in the USA and Europe highlights the benefits and costs of the different learning environments. Children were studied over time having experienced one of the following three different curricular programmes:

- a skills-based programme controlled by adults
- a free choice programme
- a High Scope programme which incorporates opportunities for children to plan–do–review.

In both instances the children who were in the High Scope programmes were shown to develop more satisfying social and personal lives (28).

As always the educator’s actions are a powerful influence on the way in which
the child develops. Questions which allow children to give open-ended answers and which spring from genuine interest in all that they do will encourage individuals to think about their achievements.

The ways in which adults respond to children will also have a powerful effect on each child’s developing knowledge about him- or herself. For example, the skilled practitioner sensitively balances giving positive affirmation to her children, while establishing clear messages about acceptable behaviours. Pam Lafferty, the director of High/Scope UK, usefully distinguishes between ‘praise’ and ‘encouragement’. Lafferty suggests that praise comes from ‘outside’ the child and is an external judgement of approval, while ‘encouragement’ is about motivating the child within and creating the ongoing desire to learn (29). Drawing on studies of work with different age groups (30, 31) the following types of responses are suggested which can either hinder or help children.

Responses which hinder children’s self-knowledge:

1. **Evaluating through praise** – where adults always take the responsibility for judging what a child has done, believing that this is their job; this restricts the child from forming her own view. Nursery settings are usually defined by constant use of praise and encouragement – comments such as ‘that’s wonderful’, ‘I’m really pleased with you’ are commonly heard; however, praise can encourage conformity when it leads children to become dependent on others rather than themselves. Gura suggests that constant use of praise can be high on warmth but low in regard to information offered – this is particularly the case when the praise is general. Moreover, overdoses of lavish praise do become devalued even by young children. Robert, age five, told me confidentially, ‘It doesn’t matter really what you paint because she [his teacher] always says it’s really very lovely.’ Young children deserve more than a comforting and benign environment. Nevertheless the use of praise is very effective when used with discretion. It is particularly helpful to encourage those children who are not well motivated, to help set the limits of behaviour and for young children who are learning to socialise and become one of a group. The Unit for Parenting Studies at Leicester University encourages parents and carers to give their children ‘five praises a day’ to improve their behaviour and self image and to redress the attention that so often is given to misbehaviour (32).

Use of praise is particularly helpful when children are being introduced to an early years setting, but in a climate of information it should be seen as a means to an end. Praise that is focused can help children to become aware of their achievements, for example ‘using those elastic bands to fix the two boxes together is really clever Dean’.

2. **Evaluating with criticism** – negative comments are inevitably going to leave children feeling inadequate and that they have failed. Importantly, if a child is criticised this usually shuts down her thinking. Early years teachers are very aware of this and negative responses are rarely used in early years settings.
Responses which help children’s self-knowledge:

1. Using silence – often in a busy nursery, and particularly when adults feel under the pressure of time, young children are not given sufficient time to reflect and collect their thoughts. However, if when asking a question, an adult pauses to allow a child time to respond, the chances are that, as with older children, the time allowed for thinking means that the response given is of greater quality. It also demonstrates the adult’s faith that the child will be able to respond, which in turn fosters the child’s confidence. Young children will learn to recognise that they are not expected to come up with quick answers and that it is more important to have time to explore what they really feel.

2. Clarifying – young children often find it difficult to put their thoughts into words. Sometimes, in their eagerness they rush to communicate and then tail away as they struggle to recall the sense of their message. Adults can actively accept children’s contributions by paraphrasing or summarising what they have said. Although the teacher may use different words she will make sure that she maintains the child’s intention and meaning. ‘I know what you are saying, David. Your idea is …’ In this way a teacher shows that she has both received and understood what the child has said.

3. Asking for information – if practitioners show genuine interest in children’s views of what they have done, this helps children to become confident in making judgements.

4. Providing information – if young children are helped to see how their paintings and constructions have developed over a period of time they will start to understand that achievements and progress are linked to growing up. A child will take pleasure in recalling her limitations as a baby and contrasting them with what she is doing now.

SELF-ESTEEM, SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND LINKS WITH LEARNING

It is generally accepted that a child who has sound self-esteem is well placed to learn. The Early Years Foundation Stage stresses that practitioners make a critical contribution to children’s learning by creating the climate and conditions that encourage their involvement. The prime way of doing this is by building their self-esteem and confidence (33). Positive self-esteem, though, is not sufficient in itself; self-knowledge is important in order for people to develop not only an optimistic view of themselves but also one which is realistic. However, in order to learn, young children must believe that they are able to do so. If this belief is not secured during the early years of life it is unlikely to blossom later. In a study to accelerate learning in science with pupils of secondary age, about half made impressive progress, the others did not. One of the main reasons for this difference was that the latter group of children were afraid of failing in thinking tasks and so gave up the mental challenges required (34).
Some children on admission to an early years setting do not regard themselves as learners. Their thoughts and views may have been disregarded by adults; caring and protective parents may not have trusted children to try out things for themselves and so learn from mistakes. These children will have learned to accept that they are not important or competent to do things for themselves. By comparison, other children on admission shine as eager and capable learners. Their early experiences have included opportunities to try things out and discuss the outcomes with adults. They have been gently helped to frame their ideas in words and their increasing command of language has helped them to feel ‘in control’ of events.

Figure 1.2 Feeling in control

Carol Dweck suggests that the view that children (or adults for that matter) adopt for themselves significantly affects the way they lead their lives. This is demonstrated when children show either helpless or mastery patterns of behaviour when confronted with obstacles in learning (35). Children who follow a mastery approach are confident and have a positive view of themselves. They seek new, challenging experiences and believe that they can succeed even in the face of difficulties. Other children are unsure of themselves; because their self-esteem is not secure they constantly look for approval from others. These children show helpless behaviour in that they ‘give up’ easily, and when things go wrong they believe that it is their own fault because ‘they are no good’.
While the ‘mastery learners’ forge ahead in learning, often on their own initiative, the ‘helpless children’ need constant reassurance and support from parents and teachers (see also Chapter 5). Although Dweck’s work was with older children, similar patterns of behaviour are evident with three- and four-year-olds as they begin to recognise who they are and what they can do.

Practitioners now have firm support from the Early Years Foundation Stage to provide well-planned play-based activities which give children scope to be creative and imaginative and have a sense of being in control. In terms of building confidence in learning, play is invaluable; Vygotsky describes this so well when he asserts that in play it is as if a child is a head taller than himself (36). This description sums up a masterly approach to play where children make their own judgements, take initiatives and seek resources and information when they require it. However, despite the national recommendations, both in schools and other early years settings there remains a degree of uncertainty about how play methodology aids learning and the practicalities of planning and provision.

As part of their training programme to implement the Early Years Foundation Stage, local authorities are supporting practitioners to provide for play which is appropriate for 0–5 year olds. In the interests of continuity of learning Year 1 teachers and assistants need access to similar support.

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**Case study**

Pascale and Jeremy were the same age, three years 11 months, and they had started nursery at the same time during the previous term. Pascale sat at a table drawing. She was clenching the pencil in a pincer grip and her movements were repetitive. Try though I might I could not gain eye contact with her or get her to respond in any way. On mentioning this to the teacher she said that she was not surprised. When Pascale was admitted to the nursery, her name was Cheri. A month later her mother requested that the name be changed to Amanda. On returning to the nursery that term the staff were further informed that Amanda was no longer to have that name but was to be called Pascale. The little girl was not sure who she was. Her teacher reported that every day Pascale refused to move from the drawing table and join any other activities in the nursery.

On passing through to the next classroom I met Jeremy who was with a fairly large group of children listening to a story about a little boy who was walking along a very long road. Jeremy, having grasped the conventions of being a pupil in a group, raised his hand to make a comment. When invited to do so he politely asked if the road in the story went on and on into infinity! The teacher, somewhat taken aback, said that it might do but suggested that Jeremy explain what the word meant. ‘Well,’ said Jeremy confidently raising his voice, so that all in the group might hear, ‘if it goes on into infinity, it might never, ever end!’

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Comment

Despite being of a similar age and having had a similar amount of time in the nursery, these two children were poles apart. Pascale, alias Cheri alias Amanda, was not even able to recognise herself in her name and showed helpless behaviour in her refusal to accept new challenges. Jeremy’s high regard for himself as a learner was evident in his active participation in the story. He was able to question and make links in his learning using a fascinating new word he had acquired. Jeremy showed all the elements of a master player using the teacher as a resource for further learning.

Before they arrived at the nursery, home experiences had already had a potent effect on Pascale’s and Jeremy’s views of themselves as learners. The staff were faced with different challenges for these two children. Pascale needed the security and consistency provided by a predictable programme and the attention and care of one adult in whom she could learn to trust. Close and sensitive links with Pascale’s mother would hopefully enable her to recognise Pascale’s needs and try to meet them at home. Jeremy’s inner resources for learning were already firmly in place. The nursery’s task here was to ensure that staff respected Jeremy’s contributions, provided additional stimulus to motivate him, and extended his skills and knowledge based on what he understood already.

The psychologist Carl Rogers says that children need two conditions in order to be creative learners. These are psychological safety and psychological freedom (37). Pascale’s future progress depended initially on the first condition being met. Rogers suggested that psychological safety is dependent on: having total trust in a child and accepting all that the child does; encouraging the child to become self-aware; trying to see the world from the child’s perspective and so getting to understand how she feels. It is only when Pascale feels safe that she will make any progress towards mastery learning. Jeremy shows that he has already benefited from positive support at home; this now needs to be sustained in the nursery; at the same time Jeremy needs the psychological freedom to try out new things and ideas.

Practical suggestions

Observe

• Observe how babies signal their needs through crying, wriggling with discomfort, responding to attention.
• Observe a child’s emerging schema, demonstrated through her patterns of play, e.g. lining up small animals in a row, covering objects, wrapping herself in a blanket.
• Observe individual children and note those who adopt mastery and helpless patterns of behaviour.

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Get to know your children

• Consider your group/class and note how much you know about each individual child: their personal characteristics (likes, dislikes, interests, talents and learning dispositions). Ask yourself ‘What is this child like and how do I know’?
• Fix a clipboard and pencil in all the areas of provision. Encourage all staff to note significant comments, questions and actions from different children as they work in these areas. At the end of the day, the key person can: collect these observations in regard to his/her children; reflect on any noted behaviour that is significant; decide on any implications for next steps.
• Plan a regular time at the end of each day/week when you meet as a staff and share any other information about children that you have gathered.

Create a climate to promote self-esteem

• Consider how your spoken and body language can affect small children, e.g. pursed lips, tensed body, toe tapping and abrupt tone of voice communicate irritability; a genuine smile, relaxed body posture, eye contact, gentle touch and warm voice communicate approachability and friendliness; a tight smile and rigid body posture communicate a mixed message and can confuse.
• Demonstrate that you are interested in, and have time for, each child, e.g. bend down to their level when speaking and listening to them; give them time to talk and try not to interrupt to cut across their thinking.
• Make each new baby and child feel special, e.g. ensure that babies are held in ways that they prefer and are soothed by tapes of rhymes and music that are familiar to them; ask each new child to bring in a photograph of herself and her family. This can be displayed on a large board and used as a topic of conversation.
• If funds allow or parents will contribute, arrange for each new child to have their photograph taken and enlarged. Attach the photograph to a card and cut to form a jigsaw. Older children will enjoy working in small groups and sorting out their own photograph and those of their friends.
• Pronounce children’s names correctly – if this is difficult, be honest with parents and ask for their help.
• Remember and refer to important details in the child’s life, e.g. How is your new kitten, Isaac? Did you enjoy the fair, Angelo?
• Provide mirrors in different parts of your environment to enable children to view themselves when working at different activities.
• Have artefacts and scenarios that reflect children’s circumstances, e.g. books where the main characters look like them, dolls which resemble their colour and characteristics, domestic play scenarios which depict familiar contexts, posters and jigsaws which make people like them and their families appear important.

Help children to talk about themselves

• Ask children to do a painting/drawing of themselves and take time to listen to them talking about their picture.

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• Ask children about their likes and dislikes about the food they eat, the
clothes they wear and their favourite activities at home and in the nursery;
these views can be scribed and displayed together with each child’s self-
portrait or made into individual books.

Provide for those children who are less secure

• Position coat pegs with the child’s personal clothing so that children can
see them during the day.
• Encourage children to bring a familiar toy to the nursery, in order to main-
tain a link with home.
• Support a child to separate from his parent/carer; suggest that he carries
with him a personal memento that he can refer to during the session, e.g.
a photograph of the parent or a personal item such as a scarf which carries
a familiar perfume.
• Ensure that an adult is available to less secure children particularly at vul-
nerable times of the day, e.g. the start and the end of the session, at tran-
sition times, and when children are outside.
• Make it possible for these children to be physically near to an adult during
group activities.

Help children to recognise what they have learned

• Publicise children’s achievements, e.g. ‘Liam is really good at doing up his
buttons – would you like to show everyone Liam?’
• Encourage children to teach others, e.g. showing a friend how to use the
mouse on the computer; how to hang their painting to dry.
• Build into your session relaxed and informal recall sessions when older chil-
dren demonstrate and discuss with others what they have experienced,
e.g. six children with a key person when each child talks about and shows
any outcomes of her most recent activity. It is important that each child
feels free to opt out or to make a minimal response. As children grow
accustomed to the session they can be encouraged to comment on other
children’s contributions.

Professional practice questions

1. How do my daily routines make it possible for me to get to know and treat
my key children as individuals?
2. How does my environment demonstrate to children that they are welcome
in the setting?
3. How far does my planning and provision reflect a balance between a ‘con-
trolling’ and ‘informational’ environment?
4. How are my children helped to consider critically what they achieve?
5. How do I help all my children to adopt mastery patterns of behaviour?
The following references in the Early Years Foundation Stage link to this chapter

Statutory Framework and Guidance: pp 12, 37
Practice Guidance: Appendix 2, Areas of Learning and Development, Self Confidence and Self Esteem (pp 28–9)
Principle into Practice Cards: Supporting every child, 3.3 The Learning Environment, (The emotional environment 4.2 Active learning (Mental and physical involvement)
The CD-ROM in depth offers further guidance on the above principles and commitments.
The following Early Years Professional Standards link to this chapter:
Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 14, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28

REFERENCES

30  YOUNG CHILDREN’S PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT