

In their Prime?

How settings can meet the requirements of the Prime areas of the EYFS in the baby room.

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It has been recognised for some time that the first couple of years of a baby's life are significant in terms of their overall development. This is now reflected in Ofsted's framework with a strong focus on how practitioners are working with babies. This means that within daycare, practice in the baby room will be considered. While every baby room will be different, this is a good time to look at every element of practice, including resources, routines and layout.

Baby rooms are interesting and at times joyful spaces. They are perhaps one of the most demanding rooms to work in within daycare. Within a baby room, there are likely to be some mobile babies intent on exploration as well as some babies who are literally starting to find their feet. Combine that with sleeps, feeds and chuck in a few nappy changes and we can start to see that putting together a baby room is like a complex jigsaw. Every piece matters.

PRIME AREAS OF THE EYFS

The Prime areas of the EYFS are the building blocks for later development. They should be central to everything we do and plan within the baby room. The Prime areas are Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED), Communication and Language, and Physical Development.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Transitions are one of the ways in which we deliver the PSED area of learning. Through positive and

smooth transitions, babies learn to make relationships and also self-regulate. Transitions in the baby room include drop-off and pick-up times, but also when staff go for breaks or a change in shift.

From around eight or nine months, these transitions can provoke separation anxiety in babies, which can then impact on their learning and development. Interestingly, in the Ofsted framework there are two inadequate judgements available to inspectors in respect of attachment and transitions.

Settling-in

The first transition that babies make will be to separate from their parents. While this is rarely a problem for babies under seven months, extreme care needs to be taken with older babies. The intended key person needs to build a relationship before separation takes place. This might mean a series of visits to the setting, with the key person increasingly playing and making physical contact with the baby. This should culminate in a few 'mini' separations to check that the baby has made a secure attachment.

Drop-off and pick-up times

The focus for drop-off and pick-up times should be about creating the conditions for a smooth handover. Small things such as having a bench for parents to 'regroup' and possibly for the key person to sit next to them can make a significant difference.

Easy storage for coats and the inevitable clobber that accompanies babies also makes a difference. The



Babies must have opportunities to explore safely while enjoying their newfound freedom

ideal is to avoid parents standing awkwardly by a door trying to juggle a baby and have a conversation.

Communication and Language

Babies need plenty of one-to-one interactions as this is the period in which they need to tune into the sounds of language. They also need to connect the words that we use to objects and actions.

Babies will need to see actions and hear corresponding words repeatedly in order to make connections and understand meaning, and this makes everyday routines, including care routines, central to language learning. In addition, adults also need to think about creating some play routines with toys and resources, including books – for example, every time a tower of bricks is knocked down, an adult might say 'All fall down'.

While routines are important for babies, there is also a need for variety. This is because bored adults make poor language partners. To get around this dilemma, it is worth adults moving with their key children to distinct spaces with specific resources both indoors and outdoors – for example, over to a book area or outdoors to a musical area. Interestingly, first words that can be heard from around 12

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months often reflect the various routines that have been developed between adults and babies.

Furniture and layout

Both adults and babies need to be comfortable in order for conversations to flourish.

- Aim to create a homely feel with a sofa so adults can sit comfortably with a baby or two on their lap.
- Put pictures and mirrors on the walls at different heights.
- Look at the changing area and consider how it will prompt conversations.
- Use waterproof mats to make the outdoor space comfortable for non-mobile babies.

Background noise

Background noise can stop babies from vocalising and hinder their ability to tune in to language, so:

- audit the amount of noise in the room
- create cosy enclosed spaces to reduce background noise
- use noisy resources outdoors – for example, musical toys – or have specific times for them when they are used indoors.

Toys and resources

Toys and resources have two main functions. They encourage babies to

explore, but in relation to communication and language they provide a focus for talk and so encourage adults' and babies' interaction.

- Do adults love using the books that are in the room?
- Are they age/stage-appropriate?
- How often do babies share the same book with the same adult, so creating a language routine?
- Is there a wide range of age/stage-appropriate toys and resources to encourage a wide range of things to talk about between adults and babies?
- Are toys and resources easy to clean and is there a cleaning schedule in place for them?

Physical Development

Physical Development is one area which can be challenging to provide for, as babies may be at very different stages in their development. When planning for Physical Development, we need to make sure that all babies have opportunities to explore safely and that, where babies are mobile, they can enjoy their newfound freedom.

Resources and layout to support large motor movements

Aim to provide:

- different textured mats for non-mobile babies to lie on
- mobiles and baby gym to encourage reaching and kicking
- cushions around babies who are starting to sit independently
- areas of flooring that are carpeted if babies are starting to crawl, as hard floors can be slippery
- plenty of space to allow for crawling or commando-style movement
- a low, wide platform for babies who are starting to climb
- opportunities for babies to pull themselves up safely and also cruise – for example, low hand rails against a wall or a ring of wooden tree stumps with babies in the middle
- soft balls for throwing and kicking
- a baby swing to encourage balance and spatial awareness
- rocking toys
- toys with wheels that can be pushed or pulled along by mobile babies.

In addition, it can be worth creating 'protection zones' for non-mobile babies, especially when

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they are in the minority. Such zones need to be sufficiently spacious so that adults can easily move around in them.

Resources and layout to support fine motor movements

Aim to provide:

- rattles and shakers that are easy to grip and manipulate
- a wide range of objects that can be safely mouthed
- treasure baskets
- opportunities to handle beakers and spoons
- cause-and-effect toys, including pop-up toys
- stacking cups, beakers and bricks
- tubes and small soft balls
- fabric and thick card books.

Treasure baskets

Treasure baskets are a 'must have' in a baby room to support fine motor movement, but also to encourage babies to feel competent. More than one is likely to be needed so that more than one baby can use them. A good treasure basket supports the Prime areas of the EYFS. The principles are simple:

- The basket or container should be low so babies can easily reach in and pull out objects.
- Provide 30 to 50 objects
 - natural objects or ones made from natural materials (i.e. wood, metal, fabric, shell, sponge and leather).
- Objects should be of different sizes, shapes and textures – for example, a small metal spoon, a wooden spoon, a round wooden ball.
- All objects must be suitable for mouthing and can be washed or wiped easily.

PLANNING ACTIVITIES

The EYFS is clear that the Prime areas are the focus when we work with the youngest children. This means that we need to keep these in mind, as well as babies' stage of development, when planning activities. Typically, a great activity for babies should encompass aspects of each of the Prime areas.

Many activities may feel fairly ordinary, such as sharing a book. But in developmental terms, not only do they link to the Prime areas, but they are exactly what babies need. Weird and wonderful activities in the baby room



around the nursery, part 9

sometimes result in babies not actually getting what they need: time with their key person, plenty of interaction and opportunities to explore at their own pace. It is also worth noting that repeated activities are more beneficial than 'one-offs'.

Here are some points to consider when planning activities:

- How much time will adults spend away from babies when setting up and tidying away?
- Will this activity allow for sustained interaction?
- Is this activity appropriate for the baby's stage of development?
- Will this activity be repeated?

Activities to focus on

There are a few activities that need to be the mainstay of practice in the baby room. All of these activities can be done in and out of doors. Interestingly, they can be tailored to individual babies' interests and needs:

- Treasure basket play with natural objects.
- Watching and catching bubbles.
- Sharing finger and action rhymes that are linked to the developmental stage of the baby.
- Stacking games with bricks and boxes.
- Sharing books that are age/stage-appropriate.
- Playing with balls.
- Peek-a-boo games with cloths, but also puppets.
- Looking at mobiles and mirrors with an adult.
- Sensory play, provided that the time for setting up and clearing away is kept to a minimum.

In addition, care routines such as nappy changing and feeding must not be overlooked as they are activities in their own right. They link to each of the Prime areas of the EYFS. Care routines that are done well support communication and language, as well as self-care skills. Care routines are also essential for building relationships, support self-regulation and also help babies develop self-efficacy (feelings of competence).

Observation and assessment

Babies should be developing quickly. Through informal observations and conversations with parents, we should be able to assess their development in the Prime areas.



- Do your resources help you to record precise assessments?
- Do your resources help you to identify when a baby's development may be atypical?
- How do you share your assessments with parents?
- How do your assessments affect your day-to-day practice with babies?

REFLECTION POINTS

There are three key terms that Ofsted considers when looking at the quality of education. These are Intention, Implementation and Impact. Here are some questions that may help you to reflect on your practice in the baby room.

Intent

- What is your system for settling babies in and for managing transitions?
- What is the rationale behind your layout and routines?
- How do you decide which resources to make available?
- What is the role of the adult in supporting communication and language?
- How do you plan for each baby's stage of physical development?
- How do you meet each baby's care needs?
- How do you work with parents to provide information and support home learning?

Implementation

- Are transitions smooth and how quickly do babies settle?
- Are adults observing babies in ways that support precise assessment?

One-to-one interactions are vital for babies

- How long are interactions with babies and do they encourage early language?
- Are care routines and activities mainly carried out by the key person?
- Are activities suitable for the age/stage of the babies?
- What opportunities are there outdoors for babies?
- What is on offer for non-mobile babies?
- Are resources suitable for mouthing?

Impact

- Are babies showing secure attachments to their key persons?
- How quickly can babies be reassured when they are upset?
- Do babies show enjoyment and interest in the activities provided?
- Do babies show that they recognise rhymes, songs and books?
- Are babies engaging with the activities and resources that are on offer?
- Do babies make eye contact and interact with their key persons?
- Are older babies showing some independence where appropriate – for example, feeding themselves?
- Are assessments sufficiently detailed and precise?
- How much information is shared with parents?
- How does the setting support the home learning environment? ■

Next month: the toddler room