



First Steps

A Review of the Planning Guidance for Early Years

Like you, we have been trying to keep up with the multiple guidance publications issued by the Department of Education since the outbreak of COVID 19. Many schools and settings we work with have been talking to us about how they have been addressing the challenges raised with relation to safety and welfare of adults and children; whilst ensuring that the best possible educational experience is provided.

With the latest guidance released over the Bank Holiday weekend, we thought it might be helpful for us to summarise some of the key points and how these may impact on practice, with a particular focus on the learning environment.

The full document and supporting materials are available at

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparing-for-the-wider-opening-of-early-years-and-childcare-settings-from-1-june/planning-guide-for-early-years-and-childcare-settings>

As well as downloading this and the supporting documentation to help you and your team plan; we would also strongly recommend you to consult with your local authority or Multi Academy Trust, to ensure you have the best possible information and guidance for you and your colleagues through these uncertain and rapidly changing times.





Some Key Points to Consider

Getting Ready

The document sets out clearly the expectation that schools and settings need to ensure that buildings have been thoroughly checked to ensure they comply with health and safety legislation. Risk assessments need to be evaluated against COVID 19 Guidance. This includes emergency procedures such as for fire evacuation.

The guidance provided about setting up spaces for children to access states that:

“The use of communal spaces in settings should be managed to limit the amount of mixing between groups as much as possible” DfE 24th May 2020

The guidance acknowledges that working with our youngest children will be different to that seen in older year groups:

“While it is not expected that children and staff within a group will keep 2 metres apart, it is important for settings to consider how they can reduce contact between groups of children and staff as far as possible, for example by ensuring children and staff mix in a small consistent group and that small group stays away from other groups” DfE 24th May 2020

Further guidance is provided regarding items we should remove during this time:

“In order to facilitate cleaning, remove unnecessary items from learning environments where there is space to store them elsewhere. Public health advice is to remove all soft toys, and any toys that are hard to clean, such as those with intricate parts. Where practicable, remove soft furnishings, for example pillows, bean bags and rugs.”





Preparing for Learning

The guidance has clear implications for the type of resources and the pedagogical model your learning environment currently reflects. However, as more children begin to return to us, we know that many will feel anxious and unsettled. Finding that a space, filled with resources you had become familiar with, has now changed beyond recognition is therefore likely to further impact on well-being, which in turn will impact on learning. Our challenge is therefore, how to create a space for children to enjoy and thrive in, without compromising safety.

The guidance states that:

“Settings should use reasonable endeavours to deliver the EYFS learning and development requirements as far as possible in the current circumstances, as set out in guidance on the temporary changes to the EYFS requirements in light of coronavirus. This means continuing to provide an environment that invites learning across all 7 areas as far as is practicable during this time” DfE May 24th 2020

There is also mention that there should be an emphasis on supporting language and communication and physical development.

Therefore, we need to think carefully about which resources we select, how these will be kept clean, the organisation of these, and related activities which will best help us to provide a breadth of learning experiences that meets the needs of our children.

Indoors

The guidance strongly emphasises the need to reduce the need for groups to share resources. This does not necessarily mean though that we should reduce the range of choices for each group, just to ensure that those choices are easy for us to keep clean and safe. At this time, it is recommended that you adhere to the guidance regarding resources to avoid, e.g. soft toys, play dough and sand pits.

Some schools we support are imaginatively creating core sets of familiar resources for each group of children, that they can still self-select from as part of child-initiated learning but crucially are easy to clean at the end of each session. We know of others that are engaging in more frequent small group activities, to help promote language and communication, as well as strengthen relationships. You will know what your children need to best support them.





Outdoors

Many schools and settings have been making the most of the outdoors at this time; helped no doubt by the wonderful weather! While we cannot guarantee that the sunshine will continue, we have long known the powerful impact of outdoor learning on the emotional well-being of children, as well as its critical role in supporting young children's physical development. When choosing and managing resources used outside, we need to carefully consider what offers maximum learning and joy but can also be kept clean; especially between groups. Traditionally when setting up outdoor provision we tend not to mirror indoor and outdoor resources, choosing to go 'big' outdoors. For now, perhaps we need to see the outdoor environment also as an indoor classroom without a roof and fill it with some new possibilities.

There are so many other wonderful and imaginative experiences that schools and settings have already been providing; and we will aim to share more of these over the coming weeks. However, what we must not forget is that the resource the children will have been missing the most will be the adults. Rebuilding these relationships will be the foundation upon which all learning will be built, as we discover together how to take the next steps in these changing times.

