

Research Report DFE-RR071

# Children's experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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## Executive Summary

### Background

This project aimed to gather examples of children's perspectives on their experiences in a range of early years settings, and to consider what these perspectives tell us about the effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008). Throughout the EYFS framework, emphasis is placed on understanding the individuality of each child, and the theme of 'A Unique Child' states that 'all children have an equal right to be listened to and valued in the setting' (DCSF, 2007). In this research, particular consideration was given to play-based learning, outdoor provision and children's participation, linked to the six Areas of Learning in the EYFS<sup>1</sup>. The findings contribute to an independent review of the EYFS, led by Dame Clare Tickell from September 2010.

### Context

Researchers worked with one hundred and forty-six children aged between three and five in different types of early years settings across four local authorities in England. The sample comprised sixteen settings, including one Steiner<sup>2</sup> setting. The methodology was designed to explore children's perceptions of their experiences, and to relate these perceptions to the EYFS. Researchers spent time with children, talking to them and sharing in activities. They then focused on the things that seemed to be most important to the children, for example the kinds of play they were keen to show us and/or talk about. Further analysis involved identifying appropriate ways of connecting children's talk with the abstract concepts, language and assumptions of the EYFS and early years professionals.

### Key Findings

#### **To what extent and in what manner are children's experiences in early years settings based around play and how enjoyable are those experiences?**

- Children talked about a range of play, including 'pretend' play, construction, drawing and painting, computer games and football. Children's access to such experiences seemed to vary considerably from setting to setting.
- Play can be linked to all six Areas of Learning and Development, but children conveyed most enjoyment of play linked to Creative Development, Knowledge and Understanding of the World, Physical Development and aspects of Communication Language and Literacy.

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<sup>1</sup> The EYFS specifies learning and development requirements that early years providers must deliver by law. The requirements include Early Learning Goals and educational programmes, organised in six Areas of Learning: Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Communication, Language and Literacy; Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical Development; and Creative Development.

<sup>2</sup> The Steiner Waldorf early childhood (birth to seven) approach is founded on the work of Rudolph Steiner, an Austrian educationalist and philosopher. The Steiner perspective emphasises the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cognitive development.

- Children described and showed favourite play areas and resources. Where children had free access to varied and flexible resources and a relatively large open area, they identified a wider range of play interests and more complex play.
- Some children talked about enjoying 'real world' experiences, for example cooking, shopping, arranging flowers and caring for pets. Children in childminding settings described the widest range of such experiences.

### **How well do children's experiences in Early Years settings meet individual children's needs and interests?**

- Children's comments suggested that their needs and interests were usually catered for.
- Children especially appreciated social play opportunities, social occasions and opportunities to care for others in their settings.
- Children's views reflected their need for parents, carers and siblings to be welcomed into settings.
- Children in our sample talked about variations in how far adults get to know them as individuals. Children's comments suggested that in smaller settings, they were more likely to feel that adults knew them as individuals.
- Children demonstrated great interest in the rules, boundaries and routines of their settings. Some children seemed to find this structure helpful; others seemed to want more freedom. Children were often keen to understand why particular rules and routines were needed.

### **To what extent do children's experiences in early years settings include physical activity, including physical activity outdoors?**

- Most, though not all, children talked about their enjoyment of physical activities, particularly outdoors. Children talked about cycling, climbing, chasing, jumping and balancing, hoops and balls. The extent of these opportunities varied from setting to setting.
- Some children commented positively on being free to choose when to play outside. In several settings, children described feeling unhappy about waiting for particular times of day for outdoor activity.
- In a few settings, children described enjoyment of indoor physical activities. This included hall games in a reception class, large-scale construction play in a Steiner setting and dancing in two childminding settings.

### **To what extent do children's views inform planning and delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage by practitioners?**

- Children in our sample often saw themselves as capable of being involved in planning their own activities. Children seemed to find it easier to choose and lead their own activities when the space was less clearly organised into areas designated for specific play themes.
- Children enjoyed planning their activities, but often they were not as involved in the planning process as they could have been.
- Many children we spoke to did not recognise the setting record as their own and some children were unhappy that they could not understand the written information.

# 1. Introduction

This project aimed to gather examples of children's perspectives on their experiences in a range of early years settings, and to consider what these perspectives tell us about the effectiveness of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008). Particular consideration is given to play-based learning, outdoor provision and children's participation, linked to the six Areas of Learning in the EYFS<sup>3</sup>. The findings contribute to an independent review of the EYFS, led by Dame Clare Tickell from September 2010.

Data was collected in different types of early years settings across four local authorities, including a Steiner setting<sup>4</sup>. Data was analysed to establish emerging themes, mapped against EYFS principles. The priority for analysis has been to amplify children's voices, and to identify common patterns in their various experiences. The report uses as much direct quotation from children as possible, with fictitious names to protect anonymity. There has also been a necessary and sometimes difficult process of connecting what children said with the abstract concepts, language and assumptions of the EYFS and early years professionals.

Reporting is presented under the headings of four research questions:

1. To what extent and in what manner are children's experiences in early years settings based around play and how enjoyable are those experiences?
2. How well do children's experiences in early years settings meet individual children's needs and interests?
3. To what extent do children's experiences in early years settings include physical activity, including physical activity outdoors?
4. To what extent do children's views inform planning and delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage by practitioners?

Themes drawn from the findings are italicised in bold and there is cross referencing between questions where data is relevant for several lines of discussion.

Where we have reported the type of setting where a particular piece of data was collected, this is useful contextual information but does not imply that generalizations about types of settings can be drawn. In a few places, we have suggested that there were features in particular types of settings that allowed certain research themes to emerge. This is particularly the case where there are significant features that distinguish settings, such as the domesticity of the childminders, the larger numbers, size and ratios of some nursery and reception classes and the specific pedagogy of the Steiner setting.

We have included the ages of children who contributed to the data and are aware that older children (4 to 5 years) were often able to provide more detailed verbal data. We consider that the age of children often helps to explain the style and nature of their perspective. Data

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<sup>3</sup> The EYFS specifies learning and development requirements that early years providers must deliver by law. The requirements include Early Learning Goals and educational programmes, organised in six Areas of Learning: Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Communication, Language and Literacy; Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Physical Development; and Creative Development.

<sup>4</sup> The Steiner Waldorf early childhood (birth to seven) approach is founded on the work of Rudolph Steiner, an Austrian educationalist and philosopher. The Steiner perspective emphasises the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cognitive development.

has been drawn from the full range of research methods to generate and exemplify the research themes as appropriate to the various EYFS principles.

In relation to each research question, key findings and recommendations are highlighted in boxes. Then, conclusions are drawn together at the end, with an overview of these provided in a final section.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology was designed to identify how children perceive their experiences of a range of early years settings, and to inform an understanding of the effectiveness and limitations of the EYFS in implementing a play-based and participative approach to learning.

To inform the review of the EYFS, the qualitative research design was structured around the four EYFS principles and the related themes and commitments<sup>5</sup> (DCSF, 2008a, p9):

- A Unique Child (Child Development, Inclusive Practice, Keeping Safe, Health and Well Being).
- Positive Relationships (Respecting Each Other, Parents as Partners, Supporting Learning, Key Person).
- Enabling Environments (Observation, Assessment and Planning, Supporting Every Child, The Learning Environment, The Wider Context).
- Learning and Development (Play and Exploration, Active Learning, Creativity and Critical Thinking, Areas of Learning and Development (see p.6).

The methodology was based on an adaptation of the Mosaic approach (Clarke and Moss, 2001), which proposes use of a mosaic of participatory methods to access young children's perspectives on their early years experiences. It also drew on participatory rural appraisal techniques (O'Kane, 2000), which include games and language based activities. These were first devised to access the perspectives of communities in relatively poor countries with oral cultures and low literacy levels. Informed by these approaches, participative activities with children were designed to correspond to each of the four broad EYFS themes and to address the four commitments within each one.

### The Sample

A sample of 15 case study settings was selected from across four Local Authorities (LAs) drawn from two government regions in the north of England. Participating LAs were invited to nominate settings matched to a sampling frame. An additional case study setting was selected from Steiner kindergartens in this area. The research took place over a relatively short time period. Therefore it was necessary to select a convenience sample of settings that, although diverse, could be accessed easily within a restricted geographical area. As a consequence, although case-study settings were recruited from contrasting LAs, the sample included a relatively high proportion of settings from areas of social and economic disadvantage as compared to settings in England as a whole. This places some limits on the potential to generalise findings.

The sampling frame was designed to include a range of early years settings providing services to children from three to five years of age. During the research, one child of 2y 11m in a childminding setting was keen to participate in the research and therefore she was also included. The sample comprised two children's centres, two reception classes, two maintained nursery classes, two private nurseries, one voluntary sector setting, one independent school, one out-of-school setting, four childminders and one Steiner kindergarten. The sample was selected to include children growing up in urban and rural settings, although the balance of the sample was towards urban settings. It was also selected to include areas of social advantage and deprivation, and ethnically diverse

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<sup>5</sup> The four guiding themes of the EYFS are each broken down into four commitments that describe how practitioners can put the principles into practice in their day-to-day work.



communities. Neighbourhood statistics (Office for National Statistics, 2010) were used as indicators to check the representation of a range of settings in terms of social and economic deprivation. The sample included children in both full day-care and sessional care.

The sample included settings with OFSTED ratings of 'satisfactory' or above, with no settings that were known to be struggling to reach minimum standards. This reflected our commitment to conduct research without inviting unnecessary ethical risks, and was considered appropriate for the research aims. The sample covered a range of children in each setting, having regard for gender, ethnicity, age and ability/disability. In all cases where parental consent was provided, children were invited to participate in the research activities. Depending on children's choices and the routines of settings, children were able to participate in one or a number of activities. The final sample of 146 children achieved the aim to represent different groups except in relation to sampling disabled children.

## **Methods**

Tizard and Hughes (2002) provide evidence about how questioning three and four year olds can have an opposite effect to that intended, with children tending to respond with mainly single word answers. However, a range of professional strategies can encourage conversation, including more sustained conversation. The research activities, based on the EYFS themes above, were designed to take account of these research findings and to use a variety of strategies for promoting talk.

### **A Unique Child**

To gather information about how well early years settings were responding to the uniqueness and difference of children, a one to one activity was used, to create a digital picture book based on the child's ideal day in a setting. A wide range of digital images of specific locations within the setting (inside and outside) was used, as well as generic images of activities, food choices and people. Researchers took photographs of locations within each setting but, to address potential ethical issues, no pictures were taken of children or adults. Supported by an adult, each child selected pictures to represent their ideal day. In conversation with an adult, the child's comments were added as script and eventually a short book called 'My Best Day' was produced, based on the child's choices.

### **Positive Relationships**

The theme of positive relationships includes a focus on a range of relationships, including children's relationships with peers and their relationships with practitioners. To gather information about children's experiences of relationships within settings, an adaptation of a floor based, visual mapping game was used. This was designed to engage young children in identifying and talking about relationships of importance to them in early years settings.

### **Enabling Environments**

To gather information about how children experienced the environment of their setting, an adaptation of the Mosaic approach 'tour' (Clark and Moss, 2001) was devised. Children were introduced to a teddy or puppet belonging to the researcher and either individually or in small groups asked to take the teddy/puppet on a tour of their nursery or setting. Children were asked to 'show teddy' the places, the activities and the things (e.g. toy, books, equipment) they liked best.

## **Learning and Development**

To gather information about children's experiences and their own views about learning and development in their settings, two strategies were identified. Firstly, where available, records of children's learning, often called 'Learning Journeys', were used as a topic of conversation between children and researcher or key worker. Secondly, where a setting did not keep accessible records of individual children and/or where children preferred to talk in the context of their play, participant observations were undertaken with individual or small groups of children. The aim was to follow the child's lead, engaging them in talk about activities at appropriate points, using strategies to facilitate talk.

The four research activities were piloted in two contrasting settings: a children's centre and a reception class. Piloting increased researcher understanding of the range of ways in which children might respond to the planned activities as well as the need for a flexible approach. The details of how the four approaches would be used were then negotiated with each setting, taking account of the age and interests of children and any other relevant factors. Due to the distinctive characteristics of the Steiner approach, a modified set of activities for use with children in the Steiner kindergartens was negotiated. The digital picture book was not used in this setting and the use of questions was further minimised.

## **Data Analysis**

A first stage of data analysis involved researchers making interpretations of data relating to children's perspectives, accessed through a range of approaches to talking with children and through participant observation. The initial analysis drew on the categories that seemed to be important to children, identified from their talk and their choices, such as the kinds of play and play contexts they were keen to show us. Categories and examples of data were identified during close reading of transcribed and observational data and these were represented in grids using Microsoft Word software. Categories and examples were cross-checked by the team of four lead researchers, leading to some revisions of initial categories. For example, many children talked about 'pretend' play, using this term rather than terms used in the EYFS, such as 'role play' and 'imaginative play'. Therefore, children's preferred term, 'pretend play', was used to identify this theme. However, it was sometimes necessary to draw on professional language rather than child language to represent identified patterns in children's choices. For example, the term 'continuous provision'<sup>6</sup>, which is familiar to practitioners, was used to identify an important theme relating to the play preferences of some children.

A second stage of data analysis involved researchers mapping identified categories relating to children's perspectives onto the EYFS themes and commitments within a first draft of the report. This was again checked for consistency of interpretation by the lead researchers. For example, children's repeated interests in and apparent enjoyment of 'pretend' play was mapped onto the most relevant EYFS commitment, The Learning Environment. Therefore, this second stage of data analysis represented a further point at which the study engaged with concepts and language more abstract than that those used by children.

A third stage of analysis was to move from the consideration of EYFS themes and commitments into findings with relevance to a review of the EYFS. Although a priority for the study was to amplify children's voices and ensure that reporting used as much direct

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'continuous provision' describes the organisation of resources in ways that enable children's independent access to a wide and predictable range. Continuous provision provides clear visibility of potential choices. For example, resources are sorted into labelled containers and placed on shelves accessible to children.

quotation from children as possible, the main findings are couched in the more abstract language of the EYFS and professional practice. However, at each stage of drafting and redrafting the research team returned to a close reading of the data to ensure the findings closely reflected our interpretations of children's perspectives.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1 Question 1: To what extent and in what manner are children's experiences in early years settings based around play and how enjoyable are those experiences?

A broad definition of play will be used in this report. Play will be seen as primarily relating to children's self-chosen creative, imaginative and exploratory activities, books and mark-making, puzzles, educational and computer games, as well as games with rules, such as football. Play will also be seen as including some activities led by adults, in particular traditional games such as 'What's the time Mr. Wolf?' and Forest School games<sup>7</sup>.

##### 3.1.1 Play opportunities

###### **Finding 1:**

Children talked about a range of play, including 'pretend' play, construction, drawing and painting, computer games and football. Children's access to such experiences seemed to vary considerably from setting to setting.

The EYFS (DCSF, 2008) includes a commitment to support Play and Exploration as one of four EYFS commitments within the broad theme of Learning and Development. Guidance highlights the importance of play for children across different kinds of settings and states that "Play underpins all development and learning for young children" (DCSF, 2008b, p7). The children we spoke to described a wide range of play-based experiences, although some children seemed to have experienced a more limited range.

We categorised data relating to children's *play-based* experiences in relation to the six Areas of Learning and Development that represent a further EYFS commitment within Learning and Development (DCSF, 2008). The themes comprise:

- Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED)
- Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL)
- Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy (PSRN)
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World (KUW)
- Physical Development (PD)
- Creative Development (CD)

The EYFS (DCSF, 2008) recognises these areas as interconnected and of equal importance. Together, they provide a framework to support learning and development for children from birth to five. This means that, where children have a relatively limited range of play-based experiences, opportunities for learning across the six areas will be restricted. In addition, opportunities for learning and development within particular areas may be constrained.

Inferences about the range of opportunities for play-based experience in each setting can be drawn from the range of experiences that children choose to talk about. Two out-of-school settings represent two ends of a continuum in terms of this range. At one end of the continuum, children at an out-of-school club talked mainly about physical activities enjoyed

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<sup>7</sup> Over the last decade in England, the outdoor curriculum of many settings has been influenced by the Scandinavian model of early education, where it is common for kindergartens to provide extended, daily opportunities for physically active and challenging play in forest environments.

during play with friends and siblings on a large, school playground. Anya (3y 5m) explained, *I like football and then cricket and then races*. Active play of this kind with friends is likely to promote children's PD and also their PSED. However, the four children at this setting talked about only two additional kinds of play, sand play and drawing. In contrast, at the other end of the continuum, Moira (5y 5m), at a childminding and out-of-school setting, described enjoyment of a wide range of *play-based* experiences: *reading stories and making books... dressing up... puppet shows... paint my otter... playing schools*. She also enjoyed physically active play, practising *silly walks* on the way home from school and playing chasing games in the childminder's garden. Holly (3y 11m) at this setting enjoyed *playing the instruments... bike riding... making strawberry cake*, alongside opportunities *to write... draw things...* play with toy *penguins* and share a number story book. The two children's play-based experiences linked to a wide range of Areas of Learning and Development, including a range of aspects of both CD and CLD.

These differences in children's perceptions of play-based experiences at the ends of the continuum relate to differences in learning environments. Within the EYFS theme of **Enabling Environments**, the commitment to **The Learning Environment** states that "a rich and varied environment supports children's learning and development" (DCSF, 2008, 3.3). While the out-of-school club and childminding setting both offered a positive emotional environment, children's talk suggests that indoor and outdoor environments contrasted in terms of the richness and variety of resources and spaces across the settings. For example, children described diverse features of the childminder's garden (see Figure 1), including a grassy area for chasing games and skittles, log stumps for jumping, and a castle and 'fairy glen' for imaginative play. In contrast, children at the out-of-school club described mainly play on a hard surfaced school playground with few resources.



**Figure 1 Childminder's garden**

### 3.1.2 Play, learning and development

#### **Finding 2:**

Play can be linked to all six Areas of Learning and Development, but children conveyed most enjoyment of play linked to Creative Development, Knowledge and Understanding of the World, Physical Development and aspects of Communication Language and Literacy.

We categorised data relating to children’s play-based experiences as **play themes**, grouped under Areas of Learning and Development. Play themes represent the main aspects of learning and development identified in children’s talk about play. Children’s own language, sometimes overlapping with the language of EYFS, was used to name themes. For example many children used the term ‘pretend’ to describe play identified in EYFS (DCSF, 2008b, p113) as “imaginative play”. The section below focuses on play-based experiences within four areas (CD, KUW, CLL and PSRN). These are ordered in terms of their significance for children, with CD the most talked about area and PSRN the least. PSED is considered in relation to Question 2, while PD is considered in relation to Question 3.

Findings suggest that children from all settings engaged in **play-based** experiences that matched to Areas of Learning and Development. However, although EYFS recognises all Areas as equally important, the extent to which children’s experiences were play-based varied from area Area to Area. Relatively few children described play-based experiences relating to PSRN and children identified relatively few experiences within aspects of other Areas. Children’s play themes are set out below, linked to four Areas of Learning and Development.

**Table 1 Children’s play themes**

Creative Development	Knowledge and Understanding of the World	Communication, Language and Literacy	Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy
<i>Pretend</i>	<i>Animals</i>	<i>Once upon a time</i>	<i>Numbers and counting</i>
<i>Music and Singing</i>	<i>Trees, plants and flowers</i>	<i>Books and reading</i>	<i>Big and small</i>
<i>Dancing</i>	<i>Pushing, pulling and rolling</i>	<i>Letters and rhyme</i>	<i>Pattern</i>
<i>Painting and drawing</i>	<i>Making things</i>	<i>Writing</i>	
	<i>Computers and cameras</i>		

#### **Creative Development (CD)**

Children talked about a range of **play-based** experiences relating to CD and this Area yielded the most examples of children’s interests. However, the extent of children’s experiences varied across aspects of CD, with **pretend play** the most prevalent play theme. Children talked about pretend play in all but one setting and, in several settings, they talked about or demonstrated this interest more than other kinds of play. EYFS (DCSF, 2008b, p113) categorises this aspect of CD as “developing imagination and imaginative play”.

Across settings, children explored a wide range of **pretend play** themes, reflecting their diverse interests. In several settings, **houses, home corners and babies** was a favourite pretend play theme. For example, children at a private nursery identified the home corner as the most popular indoor area. It was also a popular choice at a voluntary pre-school, where Luke (4y 1m) identified *playing over there (points to home-corner) with dolls* as a favourite

activity. Sara (4y 4m), at this setting, was keen to show the visiting teddy the house: *show him round the house. These are pretend babies, we play with the babies.*

Appendix 1 sets out the full set of pretend play themes, with theme names drawing on children's own ways of defining their interests. Examples of pretend play have been selected from across settings, with clear links to other Areas of Learning and Development identified.

In several settings, children also talked about or demonstrated enjoyment of **music and singing**. For example, Ning (3y 11m), at a pre-school, sang nursery rhymes to herself in Chinese and English while playing. In a reception class, Caroline (4y 10m) described music and singing as amongst her favourite activities: *Music... do songs like Humpty Dumpty and Peppa Pig... We play musical instruments.* However, musical instruments were provided on an occasional basis only in some settings. Grace (4y 3m) at a private nursery commented: *I like playing musical instruments. Sometimes we can. They are in the book room.* EYFS (DCSF, 2008) identifies music and dance as linked. However, children talked about or demonstrated their interests in *dance* in just a few settings (See Question 3).

As a further aspect of CD, children in many settings described **painting and drawing** as favourite activities. Some children enjoyed making pictures of family members or for family members. For example, at the independent nursery, Leanne (3y 7m) recalled: *That's when I was doing a picture for my mum*, while John (3y 10m) drew family members with the visiting teddy: *He is drawing his mummy and daddy.* At a reception class, Caroline (4y 10m) explained: *Paint would be my best thing. I would paint a rainbow and a flower.* However, a nursery child and a children's centre child both commented on limited opportunities to paint.

### **Knowledge and Understanding of the World (KUW)**

Children talked about or demonstrated a range of enjoyable **play-based** experiences linked to KUW. Children's play-based experiences related to many, but not all, aspects of KUW. The range of experiences relating to "exploration and investigation" (DCSF, 2008b, p78) is considered first.

Children demonstrated strong interests in **animals** in many settings, with several children talking about experiences of small animals in the natural world during outdoor play. For some children, an interest in looking closely and talking about the features of animals linked to more imaginative and playful understandings of the world. Children at a childminding setting talked excitedly about two ladybirds found in the garden. Maisie (2y 11m) explained: *And another ladybird in a tyre... He sleeps cos he's a bit tired.* However, many settings provided no or limited opportunities for children to play in natural environments where living things might be found.

Several children talked about interests in **trees, plants and flowers** and two children identified contexts where these interests had been integrated with play. Louise (4y 6m) incorporated a jug of Spring flowers into play with the visiting owl puppet at a Steiner kindergarten: *He might like to play with some flowers. He can only look at them because they're so delicate.* A different kind of play experience is evident in Fiona's (5y 3m) account of adult-led games during a reception class visit to local woodland: *Eyes tied back, I mean blindfolded. You get took to a tree and when you've feeled it you've got to go and find it again.*

Most settings provided opportunities for children to explore and investigate materials such as sand, water and dough and these were favourite experiences for many children. In some settings, children enjoyed exploring less common materials, such as gloop and shaving foam. Sylvie (4y 0m) played with sand at a children's centre: *This sand is like rain (makes sand fall from high up)... Rub your hands together. Make rain.* Kim (4y 6m) at private nursery explained her enjoyment of play with dough: *Because it's nice and sticky and I like making*

*pretend cakes*. Chris (4y 4m) liked play in a sensory area with varied objects and materials: *Smell it (to the researcher). It smells like coffee... Feel these. Oh that feels soft and tickly.*

Children in several settings talked about **pushing, pulling and rolling** objects, play providing further opportunities for investigation. For example, Alex (3y 9m) enjoyed outdoor play with friends at his nursery; pushing cars and watching them roll down the slide. Several children described pushing bikes or being pushed fast. Caroline (4y 10m) at a reception class explained: *My friends push me really fast and I like it. It's really fun and I laugh.*

Linked to “designing and making” (DCSF, 2008, p80), many children talked about **making things**, including enjoyable opportunities for building and construction. The range of resources used, however, varied across settings. Carly (4y 6m), at a childminding setting, enjoyed play with a Big Builder set, joining sections of the large-scale construction set with nuts and bolts. She was keen to show off her work: *He's got a hat now*. Caroline (4y 10m) liked the *making table* in her reception class: *I like making funny underwear*. Several kindergarten children described complex constructions combining a wider range of materials than identified by children elsewhere. For example, Lily (5 y 6m) recalled tying drapes onto two clothes horses to make a jail for kittens: *To hold the ropes on to make it more like a jail.*

As a further aspect of KUW, some children were keen to talk about play with *computers and/or cameras*, identified within EYFS as “ICT” (DCSF, 2008, p82). Playing games on computers was a favourite activity in several settings, including one nursery class. Diane (3y 8m), in this class, also enjoyed *pretend play* involving a computer: *I like going on the pretend computer in there in the house*. There was one example of children playing with a wider range of ICT equipment. Children in a childminding setting enjoyed taking photographs of each other with a digital camera and pulling silly faces. This included Maisie (2y 11m), who had a turn to photograph a younger child: *I want Colin now*. However, in several settings, although computers were available, children did not identify this as an interest.

The EYFS (DCSF, 2008b) includes foci on “place” (p86) and “communities” (p87) as further aspects of KUW. Children explored interests in these aspects of their lives through a range of *pretend play* (See Appendix 1). They also talked about playing at *holidays* in an independent nursery, identifying interests in and experience of places beyond the locality. Zara (4y 0m) explained a favourite game: *You play holidays. These are the passports.*

“Time” (DCSF, 2008b, p84), a further aspect of KUW, was not represented in children’s talk about play in an explicit way. However, this was an important feature of other enjoyable experiences, for example growing plants.

### **Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL)**

Children talked about the different aspects of CLL to varying degrees in different settings. In most settings they talked positively about experiences of **books and reading**, particularly story books, and enjoyed opportunities to look at or read books, choose books from book corners and listen to stories read by adults. However, children made few references to factual books or to books in play areas other than book corners. There were also differences in how children talked about books across settings. Several children emphasised the enjoyable or playful aspects of books and reading. Sylvie (4y 0m) at a children's centre explained: *This is where you play with books and if you want to read you climb up on the sofa and cuddle up on*. Yo Lee (4y 3m) enjoyed humorous books at his voluntary pre-school: *This book is funny. I love funny books*. Jenny (4y 3m), at the same setting, enjoyed feely books: *Because it's got feely bits on it... especially the blanket one, I like lifting it up.*

This focus on the intrinsically enjoyable aspects of books and reading contrasts with children’s talk about reading scheme books, particularly in one reception class. Here,



children focused on the levels of colour coded books and the routines of changing books to move onto new levels, but they did not discuss the content of books or pleasurable experiences of sharing books. Simon (4y 11m) explained *I'm going up to yellow*, and Fiona (5y 3m) noted: *We have to change books and that's my favourite thing as well*. Sally (5y 2m) in this class enjoyed books most when free from the expectation of reading with a teacher: *I like it when it's just children because then you can make your own words*.

The EYFS (DCSF, 2008b) includes a focus on “language for communication” (p44) and “language for thinking” (p47). Language underpinned many of the play-based experiences that children talked about, for example both pretend play and storytelling. Holly (3y 11m) and Moira (5y 5m) demonstrated interests in retelling familiar stories and making up new ones, using story language such as 'once upon a time'. Moira (5y 5m) identified the puppet theatre (see Figure 2) as a favourite activity and retold an extended version of the story of Rapunzel while putting on a show. Holly (3y 11m) also devised an extended story using the toy theatre: *Once upon a time there was a puppet show and it was about a family of dogs*.



**Figure 2 Puppet Theatre**

A few other children retold or devised stories while talking or playing alongside a researcher. At a Steiner kindergarten, Jack (4y 5m) retold a story about a forest of oak trees, prompted by a photograph of children acting out the story: *This is when we were trying to play a game. I were playing with that oak tree with the little bud. When the wind blowed, all the oaks*. Steiner teachers emphasised story-telling, retelling particular stories daily over the course of a week. Jack was retelling a story which he had heard several times and also acted out.

The **once upon a time** theme was evident in other play, where children engaged in storying as they drew pictures or played with small world materials. ‘Storying’ is a term used to describe how children create narratives in the context of play (Gouch 2010). The term ‘small world’ refers to small scale toys, representing people, animals and objects, for example a dolls house or train set. Most examples of storying were found at one childminding setting and the Steiner kindergartens. Yo Lee (4y 3m), at a voluntary pre-school, also told an extended story as he played with Lego and a small world horse: *The little horse is hiding in the house where it's really warm*. Across the settings, however, there were relatively few examples of children talking about or demonstrating interests in storytelling and storying.

In a few settings, children also talked about and/or engaged in play with **letters and rhyme**. This interest relates to “linking sounds and letters” (DCSF, 2008, p50). Reception class children talked about play with magnetic letters and Billy (3y 10m) played with interlocking alphabet blocks in a nursery class: *b for my name... down, I don't want it upside down do I? ...that's a p*. Holly (3y 11m), at a childminder setting, played with rhyming sounds while creating a magic spell: *Abracadabra, abracadoo, make the toy box be a gnu*. Some

reception children were also proud of knowledge of letters and sounds learnt outside play contexts. Fiona (5y 3m) explained: *That's what we learn. We know every single letter.*

A small number of children talked about or demonstrated interests in **writing** in play contexts. Alex (3y 9m), at a nursery class, played with friends, chalking on a playground alphabet snake: *We done all letters.* Adam (4y 3m), at this setting, wanted to label a plant pot containing a *pretend* seed for the visiting teddy: *How do you write his name?* At a childminding setting, Moira (5y 5m), made a distinction between real and pretend writing: *I did all this pretend writing. I was a bit bored of doing real writing.* Children in both reception classes enjoyed writing letters to people, including family members, in writing areas set up for play. Jim (5y 3m) also sent a letter to a story character: *That's my letters... I asked the tiger to come for tea.* Children in one reception class described some writing as work. Lucy (5y 1m) noted: *That's my writing... that's my work* and Sarah (5y 2m), pointing to a literacy worksheet, explained: *We haven't done our work and it's tidy up time.*

### **Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy (PSRN)**

Relatively few children talked about *play-based* experiences relating to PSRN. However, in some settings, they enjoyed play-based experiences of **numbers and counting** to 10 or beyond. This reflects an EYFS (DCSF, 2008b, p56) focus on “numbers as labels and for counting.” For example, Michael (4y 3m) and younger children at his childminding setting were keen to demonstrate knowledge of number rhymes and use of related props. Maisie (2y 11m), at this setting, watched the childminder walk across a balance beam while counting, and announced: *I can do it.* She asked him to repeat this and they counted to 20 together. At another childminding setting, Laura (3y 6m) identified a counting game, ‘Incy Wincy Spider’, as a favourite game and explained: *When it's your turn, you roll a dice and then you play with spider up the spout.* At a children's centre, Paul (3y 5m), was interested in number tiles on a floor number line outdoors. He tried throwing bean bags onto number six, saying the number repeatedly before being interrupted by younger children removing the tiles.

More unusually, Yo Lee (4y 3m) created a sustained story about numbers while playing with blocks: *One red stone blew away* [picks up red block and places in tray in the middle of the table], *and blew two away* [removes two more blocks], *and blew another two away* [removes the last red block]. *No more yellow blocks, so the pink colour is the winner.* This was the only identified example of children “calculating” (DCSF, 2008, p68) in the context of play.

In some settings, children talked about numbers in relation to adult-led activities, identified as learning or work in contrast to play. Lucy (5y 1m) enjoyed writing on the large whiteboard at her reception class: *1 add 5 = 6 ...All work.* Aziza (4y 4m) at a private nursery explained: *The aunties teach me... They do numbers with us when we're sitting on the carpet.*

The EYFS (DCSF, 2008) includes a focus on mathematical language, for example language of shape, size, measurement and position, and a focus on pattern. Few children talked about play-based experiences in these areas. However, in one nursery class several children talked about **big and small** as a favourite computer game. Adam (4y 3m) explained: *Play Big and Small. It's funny.* Billy (3y 10m), in this class, also described play with a set of shape blocks: *yellow square... little circle like that.* At an independent nursery, John (3y 10m) chose to play with a tape measure: *Carol (practitioner) lets us play with this (tape measure).* He took the tape measure away to measure cupboards. Laura (3y 7m) was excited by a large empty box at her childminding setting and used positional language to describe her friend's play: *You go right in it, like Carly is in it, to the back.* Across settings, however, relatively few children talked explicitly about interests in the mathematical aspects of their play.

### 3.1.3 Indoor and outdoor learning environments

#### **Finding 3:**

Children described and showed favourite play areas and resources. Where children had free access to varied and flexible resources and a relatively large open area, they identified a wider range of play interests and more complex play.

Across settings, learning environments (DCSF, 2008c, 3.3) varied in terms of the range of resources and the organisation of resources and space. These factors affected the ways in which children played and their enjoyment of play indoors and outdoors. In particular, they affected opportunities for children to think through ideas in a sustained way and to make connections in their play. Craft (2002, p91) argues that “possibility thinking” lies at the heart of children’s creativity. Three examples below provide examples of children thinking through the play possibilities of loosely defined spaces and open-ended resources. Many early years practitioners use the term 'open-ended' to refer to flexible resources, such as wooden blocks, pine cones and pieces of fabric, that children can choose to use for varied purposes

Children making connections in play was an unusually strong feature of one childminding setting where three girls, Angie (3y 5m), Holly (3y 11m) and Moira (5y 5m) had opportunities to **make choices from continuous provision** (see Figure 3) and where the routine was particularly flexible and responsive to children’s needs. The term 'continuous provision' describes the organisation of resources in ways that enable children's independent access to a wide and predictable range. Continuous provision provides clear visibility of potential choices. For example, resources are sorted into labelled containers and placed on shelves.



**Figure 3 Continuous provision at a childminding setting**

Holly (3y11m) was able to follow interests and make connections in her play, supported by opportunities to make choices from a wide range of continuous provision (see Figure 3). After selecting and playing with a Noah's ark jigsaw, she remembered a box of plastic wild animals, kept nearby, and got these down from a shelf. She spent some time playing imaginatively with the animals and became interested in the penguins, which were part of the collection. Holly next remembered the larger collection of small world penguins on a shelf nearby: *I'm going to get the penguins out. And this is a plastic penguin... This is called Macaroni penguin.* Acting as a **play partner and supporter**, the childminder extended Holly's play by collecting a favourite story book about penguins from another room.

Later in the session, Angie (3y 5m), Holly (3y 11m) and Moira (5y 5m) developed their shared interest in schools and made connections in their play by **developing a play theme between indoors and outdoors**. The childminding setting had French windows, opening up onto the garden and children had ongoing access to outdoor play. A game of schools began indoors, where children collected resources from continuous provision, including pretend packed lunches, a satchel, writing book and mark-making materials. They took these outdoors, setting up a school at a small table at the end of the garden (see Figure 1). The childminder reported that this had been a favourite game for over a year. The ongoing availability of a range of familiar resources provided opportunities for the children's interest to be sustained over time, both within the session and over a significantly longer period. The small garden table also represented a space that was open to different possibilities.

Several children at the Steiner kindergartens demonstrated high levels of creativity in their play. They used and talked about resources and space indoors in ways that were different to elsewhere. Most settings had defined role play areas with a range of realistic props (see Figure 4). For example, Wade (4y 9m), in his reception class, enjoyed pretend play in a role play police station with a range of police station props: *I like dressing up as Police. Police arrest people. I have a look on the computer and dress up and put the hats on.*



**Figure 4 Role play police station**

Instead of mainly realistic props, the Steiner kindergartens included a range of flexible and **moveable materials and resources**. These included large scale construction resources, moveable furniture and diverse small scale resources. Kindergarten children selected from continuous provision from around the room, and then moved resources to the **large, undefined central space**, following their chosen pretend play themes (see Appendix 1). Two examples below show children's use of this distinctive learning environment. They highlight children following their own interests, thinking through the possibilities of resources and combining these in creative ways.

Taking the visiting owl puppet on a tour of the setting, Louise (4y 6m) made connections between a range of resources that she collected and combined as she followed her interest in homes and families. She brought the owl a small wooden bed, cushion, blanket, shells, flowers, marbles, goblets and two toy horses from home, and combined these as a home in the central area of the room. Louise (4y 6m) engaged in sustained *storying* and made connections with her home experiences as she played: *I gave the horses a little nap as well. Cos they're exhausted as well. They haven't had a nap because they've been playing in the bath. I've got my horse upstairs in the bathroom.* While Louise (4y 6m) created a small-scale home, Edward (5y 4m) played creatively on a larger scale. He described making a shop, using blocks, clothes horses, drapes and a range of smaller moveable resources: *That's me and I were doing a shop with Jon. You put things on a table and then you make a shop... We pretend the crystals are like money.*

The particularly 'open ended' play environments of the Steiner kindergartens (see Figure 5) supported a wide range of play themes. Children built and played in *a house... a vets... a bus... a shop... a cafe... a space rocket* and *a bus*. This approach to the organisation of space and resources provides distinctive opportunities for planning from children's interests and promoting creativity.



**Figure 5 Steiner kindergarten play area**

In a few settings, children seemed concerned by aspects of the play environment that limited their enjoyment of play. Amy (4y 6m), at a private nursery, noted that drawing paper was not replenished: *There are loads of drawers. Some are not that full... it would be better if these were full*. She also noted where play materials had been returned to wrong drawers: *This is supposed to be in there. It's all muddled up*. This concern was echoed by Sylvie (4y 0m) at a children's centre as she sorted misplaced resources: *It actually belongs there*. In contrast Richard (5y 0m), at a reception class, liked the varied materials for drawing that were part of continuous provision: *There's different colours, gold paper, gold pen and purple paper and purple pens*.

### 3.1.4 Real world experiences

#### **Finding 4:**

Some children talked about enjoying 'real world' experiences, for example cooking, shopping, arranging flowers and caring for pets. Children in childminding settings described the widest range of such experiences.

Along with play-based experiences, children in some settings talked about their engagement in **real world** activities and experiences. These were primarily domestic activities, often carried out alongside an adult, such as cleaning, gardening, shopping, collecting older children from school and food preparation. Such experiences were most common for children who attended childminding settings. Some children also talked about **visits beyond the setting**, which were more occasional experiences, for example visiting places of interest or going to a show. Tizard and Hughes (2002, p.xv) identify the "richness, depth and variety" of young children's conversations during daily domestic activities as compared to much talk during play in nurseries. Their finding was mirrored in this research, reflecting children's engagement in real world experiences.

Engagement in real world activities seemed important to children in terms of supporting a sense of competence (see Question 4). Some children were keen to take on what might be commonly seen as adult roles, for example preparing food. Real world activities also provided opportunities for sustained interaction with adults, as when Carly (4y 6m) arranged flowers with her childminder. In addition, they provided opportunities for children to demonstrate knowledge and understanding, linked to their interests, as when Angie (3y 5m) and Holly (3y 11m) practiced reading house numbers on the way to school (see Appendix 2).

We have identified a set of real world themes matched to children's interests. A full set of themes with examples can be found in Appendix 2. Real world themes mirror the pretend play themes identified in Appendix 1 but one additional theme (countries) is included.

**Cooking and eating** was an important theme for children in several settings, particularly where there were opportunities to participate in food preparation. Maisie (2y 11m) enjoyed making cakes with her childminder early in the morning and talked about this repeatedly: *We made cakes with different colours. You will be excited when we eat them.* She also enjoyed sharing the cakes with adults and children during the mid morning snack time outdoors.

### 3.1.5 Summary

Children across settings talked about their enjoyment of play-based experiences. However, there were marked differences in the range of experiences that children commented on in different settings. At one end of a continuum, children commented primarily on enjoyment of physical activities outdoors, for example, football, cricket and races. At the other end of the continuum, children showed us a range of areas and resources for play and they described diverse play-based experiences enjoyed indoors and outdoors. These experiences seemed to us to match to many aspects of the EYFS Areas of Learning and Development.

Children's comments suggest that the extent of their play-based experiences varied in relation to the EYFS Areas of Learning and Development. In most settings, children talked in particular about their enjoyment of pretend play, which we see as linked to aspects of both CD and KUW. However, in most settings children talked less about play linked to aspects of PSRN, in particular numeracy, than about play linked to other Areas of Learning. In relation to CLL, children in most settings told us that they liked to look at books alone or with friends, but fewer children talked about opportunities to retell stories or write in playful ways. In a small number of settings the comments of some children suggest that they experience some literacy and/or numeracy activities as 'work', which they sometimes view as less enjoyable than other activities. These findings suggest future priorities for continuing professional development.

Children's talk about the play environments in our sample settings also suggests wide variation in the nature, range and organisation of resources, as well as the deployment of space across settings. Comments indicate that these factors may affect both the ways that children play and their enjoyment of play. While children in several settings talked about play with small-scale resources, for example farm animals and Lego bricks, selected from accessible 'continuous provision', children more rarely talked about or demonstrated enjoyment of opportunities to construct with both small and larger scale open-ended resources such as wooden hollow blocks, planks, crates and ladders that could be moved around. Children in two settings talked with a sense of engagement about construction and/or pretend play with large-scale, moveable resources outdoors. However, only children in the Steiner kindergartens talked about their enjoyment of play of this kind indoors. In addition, the comments of kindergarten children most often linked construction play with relatively complex role play, for example building a bus to drive people from a Park and Ride into town. Play of this kind appeared to be supported by the large, undefined space in the central area of each classroom that was available for children to shape to a range of purposes, for example, constructing a café, a puppet show and a vets. The Steiner play provision, therefore, provides an interesting model that raises questions about how best to promote creative play.

A further finding was that some children talked about their enjoyment of 'real world' experiences as much as play. Real world experiences were primarily domestic activities, often undertaken alongside an adult in the setting or on visits into the community. Such experiences matched to children's interests and supported their sense of competence. The EYFS (DCSF, 2008) emphasises the delivery of Areas of Learning and Development

through play. It is useful to consider, alongside this, the potential of real world experiences to support learning and development.

### 3.2 Question 2: How well do children's experiences in early years settings meet children's individual needs and interests?

This second research question builds on the first, in that many of the findings about children's enjoyment of their experiences of early years settings necessarily match their individual needs and interest. In highlighting aspects of children's individuality, we have made strong links to children's social and emotional development, particularly the relationships between their homes and families and early years settings. Interestingly, many of the findings suggest that children's desire to be seen as individuals is balanced or even outweighed by their wish to be recognised and treated as members of a group.

#### 3.2.1 Peer relationships and well-being

##### Finding 1:

Children's comments suggested that their needs and interests were usually catered for.

##### Finding 2:

Children especially appreciated social play opportunities, social occasions and opportunities to care for others in their settings.

Children often showed that they appreciated the range of activities offered to them in settings and they particularly appreciated the opportunities for **choosing activities with others**, rather than on their own (see also Question 2). At a voluntary pre-school, Sophie (3y 10m) said: *Georgie, Anna and Cara and me, we play all the games we like and choose. And then we can draw and then we play babies. And that's what we do.* In this way, **making and having friends** was also demonstrated as important to children in every setting and linked to a sense of self confidence.

Martin (3y 7m) at a voluntary pre-school talked about the importance of who he played with as compared to the activity undertaken: *I like... the sand because I like playing with Tom in the sand... playing with the trains because I do it with Tom... I like playing Lego with Tom. I don't like playing on my own... I like playing with the aeroplane with Tom.*

Sometimes children enjoyed playing in larger groups. Caroline (4y 10m), in a reception class, explained: *I like lots of friends playing at the same time.* Children frequently expressed **negative feelings about playing alone**. For example, in one reception class, children commented that if you play on your own: *you'll be sad and you'll be mardy* and that *older children will find you a friend*. In a nursery class, Brian (4y 6m) talked about the children he liked to play with, the children he counted as best friends and the children who didn't have this status. Thus, he said to his friend: *I draw with Robert and you. We're not best friends with Robert any more.*

In many cases, different types of friendships were apparent. For example, **friendships with children of the same gender** were cited, across children of all ages, as important. Lucas (5y 4m) in a reception class said: *I don't play with the girls. Only with boys.* Sarah (4y 8m) in the same class said: *Don't like playing with boys because they are mean.*

**Relationships with different age children** in a setting were talked of as significant, particularly when children had been at the same setting since babyhood. For example, children at a private day nursery demonstrated an understanding of the needs of younger children and talked about the babies as *asleep because they are tired*. In a private nursery, Iram (4y 5m), talked about her time at 'Caterpillars', the room she had been in as a younger

child. In this way, there appeared to be a firmer sense of continuity and belonging for children who had been in one setting for several years.

Children in two childminding settings enjoyed the opportunities to be with younger children partly it seemed, because the comparisons highlighted how grown up they were. Maisie (2y 11m) laughed when she saw Colin trying to eat his bun: *Colin was going to eat it with the paper on. You don't do that [to Colin].* In the other childminding setting, Laura (3y 7m) and Carly (4y 6m) enjoyed talking about the babies while they sat together at the lunch table. Laura said: *When you say no to babies, they cry* and they also enjoyed teaching the toddlers to point at the children by name: *Where's big Carly... where's little Carly?*

Some older children were perceived as especially kind in situations where **feelings** were fragile. For example in an out-of-school club, Nasreen said that she would go to Fiona if she was hurt because *she is kind*. Alternatively, there was a sense of loss expressed, with regard to **older friends who had moved to other settings**. In a children's centre, Sarah (4y 0m) was looking at a photo of another child who had since moved to *big school* and said with some dejection: *I wonder what she is up to now?* Often older children were especially valued as play partners. Michael (4y 3m) proudly talked about playing football with the childminder's *bigger* son.

Despite many children's interest in older and younger children, settings varied in the opportunities that were given to children to play across age-phase groups. In the Steiner settings children's ages spanned from 3 to 6 years old and Robert (5y 1m) commented: *It was Jon, my friend. He's moving up this year and I'm moving up next year.* Nevertheless, in foundation stage units, where nursery and reception aged children also had some opportunities to play together, cross-age friendships were not as evident, perhaps because the routines limited these opportunities.

Several children talked about their own anticipated **transitions from age phase to age phase**, into full-time school or the next class. Transitions seemed to be regarded in a positive way and lead to feelings of pride. Zara (4y 0m) at an independent nursery pointed across the play area to her future school and stated: *That's Burns House. I've got a place there.* In a nursery class that joined with the reception class for some afternoons, Colin (3y 11m) also showed positive feelings towards his future class, saying: *I wanted to show you some things I liked in reception.*

Children in some settings, including several nursery age children, experienced **transitions within the extended day**, which were additional to home to setting transitions. This was the case for Sylvie (4y 0m), who attended a nursery class in the morning and a children's centre session in the afternoon. There was just one girl of a similar age at the small children's centre nursery on the day of the visit and, when asked about **social play choices** at the children's centre, Sylvie identified two nursery class friends as the children she most liked to play with: *It would be Maisie and Sally – she is at my school... cos she loves me.* Therefore, **having friends elsewhere**, in particular best friends, seemed to be an issue for Sylvie. Children in the out-of-school club also experienced daily transitions. However, this was a positive experience for several children, including Saima, who enjoyed the opportunity to play with older siblings and their friends.

With regard to broader aspects of children's relationships and well-being, animals were also important to children and children talked about **caring for pets**. One childminder had a cat which Billy (4y 6m) indicated that he would go to if he was hurt. Other children in a nursery class engaged in playing at caring for pet animals and Lily (5y 6m) at the Steiner kindergartens said: *That's me and I have taken the cats to the vets.* Children at a private nursery talked about the rabbit *hiding in his bedroom* and the guinea pigs. More examples of this theme in children's play are discussed in relation to Question 1.



Sophie (3y 10m) at a voluntary pre-school talked about the social importance of **food** by saying: *We sit down at the table and some people stay for lunch. I don't stay for lunch. I would like to but I don't. I have some lunch at home.* In some settings, children also enjoyed the opportunity to eat together outside. Fiona (4y 3m) liked an **outdoor snack-time** during regular visits by her reception class to a woodland: *It's fun... We go on a walk and we have our snack there.*

Sometimes, food was connected with children's attachment to their parents. Michael (4y 3m), eating a big lunch at his childminder's house, explained: *My mummy's going to be happy with me.* Children also often looked forward to snack times as relaxation after a day at school. For example, Moira (5y 5m) explained her enjoyment when she arrived back at her childminding setting: *I like to eat. Wraps. We can eat fruit. We have milk, fizzy apple, orange and water and milk.* Additionally, at the out-of-school club, Faisal said: *I love snack, I love the noodles and we sit with Fiona and she tells us about horses.*

Finally, two children in a reception class described what can be interpreted as **a sense of well-being**, gained from a class activity where they sat with 'talking partners,' taking it in turns to massage necks, shoulders and backs. Zeb (4y 10m) explained: *It makes me feel warm inside*, while Caroline (4y 7m) commented: *It makes me feel relaxed.* However, not all children shared this; Tim (4y 10m) was less sure: *My partner squeezed me too hard.*

In summary, whereas children did express individual feelings that relate to an adult concept of well-being, what is striking about all these examples is that children commented on well-being as related to social situations and relationships with others.

### 3.2.2 Parents, homes and families

#### **Finding 3:**

Children's views reflected their need for parents, carers and siblings to be welcomed into settings.

Children's play and talk was often dominated by references to **parents, carers, families and homes**. This suggests that they need the adults who care for them in different contexts to develop positive relationships with each other. Elly (4y 10m) at the Steiner kindergartens was confident that her mum would talk to her teacher if there was some kind of problem: *Andrea, in the morning, she sometimes talks to Andrea about important things... I don't know what.*

Children often depicted their families in drawings. In an independent nursery, Anisa (4y 4m) placed the pen on the teddy's arm and said: *He is drawing his mummy and daddy* and Sarah (5y 2m) at a reception class commented: *It's a drawing of me and my mummy... I love my mummy. She gives me a cuddle.* Children often missed their families, especially mothers. Ellen (5y 4m) in a reception class commented: *Two times I've been crying because I want Mummy to come. Please can you help me write a letter? I've got the words in my head: Dear Mummy, I love you so much. I wish you were here with me.*

In another reception class example, Lisa (5y 3m) said: *Mummies and daddies only come when it's something special in the hall and we show them something.* This suggests that relationships with parents become more distanced when children start statutory schooling, though the previous examples demonstrate that these children still talk about and miss parents.

Whatever the extent of the links between the parents and settings, home and families were frequently **kept in children's minds** and talked about. For example, in a voluntary pre-school, children commented on relationships with parent volunteers (although only mothers

were mentioned): *She's one of the mummies. She helps us at nursery.* Sean (4y 2m) at a private nursery talked about going home at the end of the session: *If you don't go home, you might cry* and Maisie (2y 11m) chose the picture of the coats and rucksacks hanging up in the hall as a picture representing part of her best day at the childminders: *That's when my mummy comes.*

Children talked about **brothers and sisters** as well as parents. Sara (4y 4m) at a pre-school said: *Me and my sister go to swimming and my sister goes to ballet.* Children in some childminding settings and an out-of-school club were especially able to enjoy opportunities to play with siblings. For example, at the out-of-school club, Saima commented: *I like to play cricket with my brother* and Maisie (2y 11m) talked excitedly about making a snow man with her primary school aged brother and the childminder on a snowy day: *Then it went onto my face. And I cried (she laughs as she says this). We making snowman. And I got a stick... My brother came with a stick... Can you see my brother?*

### 3.2.3 Adult roles

#### **Finding 4:**

Children in our sample talked about variations in how far adults get to know them as individuals. Children's comments suggested that in smaller settings, they were more likely to feel that adults knew them as individuals.

Children were mostly clear about the **adult roles and hierarchies in settings**. This was especially so for those in the older age range. Staff were referred to in a variety of ways, depending on the setting, and at one private nursery, staff were referred to as 'aunties' and 'uncles'. Children in one reception class were able to accurately identify the hierarchy of all the staff pictures and Elly (4y 10m), at the Steiner kindergarten, knew who to tell if she had a problem: *One of the teachers... Andrea because she is the main teacher, she's here every day.* In an independent nursery, the children knew that the manager was the person that their parents would speak to and children in a voluntary pre-school also identified the manager as the person in charge.

Caroline (4y 10m) and Melanie (4y 7m), in a reception class, were able to talk at more length about the **different adult roles** in relation to a large group of staff members. Melanie referred to the teaching assistant as the person who does *massage with us... helps people to write*, while Caroline noted that she *plays games with us in the hall*. Melanie described a higher level teaching assistant as the person who *does PE with you*, while Caroline noted she *sits on the carpet and reads with you*. Caroline saw a teaching assistant, as *one of the workers... not a teacher*. The head teacher was identified as a more distant figure: *She does work in the office... does stuff in hall assembly... That's the only thing she does with us*. In the same reception class, when asked if adults played in the block area, Fiona (5y 3m) thought it was *just children* who played in the area.

Children also sometimes talked about staff roles outside the settings. For example, Melissa (5y 0m) at the Steiner kindergarten said that her teacher might talk to her mum if she had an accident and also that: *Jane (teacher)... might phone my mummy because she's a nurse.*

Children also showed appreciation of adults. At a private nursery, Dean said: *It's lovely to see Mrs Lewis. She works at Blue room. She goes on the computer. She plays outside at the rising fives.* However, in the same setting, other children commented that the adults' role was to *teach everybody* and that *someone needs to watch me outside or inside*. Thus, adults were also linked to an authoritative and supervisory view of teaching. Similarly, children in a voluntary pre-school referred to adults as *teachers* or *ladies* and as *helping them to play* and *telling people not to be naughty*. In contrast, although all the immediate staff in a children's centre were familiar to the children, staff roles were less clear to them.

Generally, adults were seen as both a **source of both authority and appreciation**. For example, Elly (4y 10m) at the Steiner kindergarten was confident that adults would deal with unkindness: *You'd tell Anna and she would tell them off, you don't do that in kindergarten*. Lilly (4y 1m) in a nursery class commented that if she had painted a picture her teacher would say: *Good idea... Hang it up* and Caroline (4y 10m) also described in positive terms how one of her teachers would respond if she drew a good picture, saying: *She would laminate it... Mrs Reed is very kind and she loves my drawings*.

Less frequently, children's view of an adult was that of **play partner** (see Question 1). A child at a private nursery asked the researcher: *Would you like to come to the sand-pit and help me build? Put sand in there... put sand in the mixer, there is too much sand in there - it's not working now*. When Simon (4y 6m) was asked if anyone in the nursery class had helped him build his ark, he replied: *Mrs Kay did*.

Children in the childminding settings seemed to have the closest attachment to practitioners, often supported by the fact that children had been with the same childminder since they were babies and that their parents had friendly and informal relationships with the childminder. In these settings, adults were more likely to be seen as play partners. When Sharon, the childminder came out to join the children in the garden, Maisie (2y 11m) ran towards her and gave her a hug announcing, *I love you*.

However, in most settings, children often demonstrated that they had **relationships with a range of adults** rather than a strong bond or attachment with one particular member of staff. Children at a voluntary pre-school didn't show a preference for any particular member of staff and some of them couldn't identify the names of all the staff and volunteers or the manager. However, although this suggests some weaker relationships in this setting, children at this pre-school did enjoy contact with parent volunteers and experience a strong sense of shared care in this way. Thus, there was inconclusive evidence as to whether knowing a key worker made a child feel more secure in the setting. More often, children wanted to **show independence**. For example, Aziza (4y 4m) at a private nursery commented that she knew her key worker but did not mind that she was absent as *I do everything by myself*.

In some settings there was evidence of a **special relationship with a key adult for particular activities**. Louise (4y 6m), in the Steiner kindergartens, was aware that children gathered together with their key person to go in for story time following outdoor play. She was also aware of groups of children 'belonging' to a particular adult: *It's story time for the Plum tree children. I'm in Pear tree. After Gina's children, Andrea's story time children is the same as Pear tree*. In a nursery class, children also associated their key person with particular group times.

In a children's centre, there was also evidence that **relationships with young adults or trainees** were important to children and at two childminder settings; the teenage sons were well known and respected by the children.

### 3.2.4 Routines and Rules

#### **Finding 5:**

Children demonstrated great interest in the rules, boundaries and routines of their settings. Some children seemed to find the structure helpful; others seemed to want more freedom. Children were often keen to understand why rules and routines were needed.

There were numerous examples across settings of children commenting on their knowledge and understanding of boundaries in terms of **routines**. Routines are cited as important to practitioners in the EYFS, for example, practitioners are advised to observe and assess

children as part of an effective daily routine (DCSF, 2008c, 3.1). We also found that routines can be enabling for children, by offering predictability and a feeling of control over their environment (see the case of Billy in Question 4). Where routines allowed flexibility as well as predictability, children's play was less likely to be interrupted (see Question 1).

In some contexts, however, children experienced routines that appeared to lack flexibility. In a private nursery, Dean (3y 1m) said: *We can go painting if we want, put an apron on... teddy can have an apron and I can have an apron, a red one... teddy can you wash your hands, just rub them like that... teddy where's the paint brush? I'll find some paint... where is the paint?* The adult response to Dean was that it was snack time. Thus, the constraint of the setting routine interfered with Dean's planning of his activity. 'Active learning' (DCSF, 2008c, 4.2) suggests that children should be given time to follow a line of enquiry 'given the constraints of your routines' and arguably this is an example of where the routine could have been adapted to enable Dean to continue with his activity. Similar examples of the constraints of routine also occurred in children's access to the outdoor environment and their use of it (see Questions 3 and 4).

Across most settings, children frequently talked about the limits imposed on them in terms of **rules**. Although knowing about rules helped them to feel secure, sometimes rules constrained individuals. This was particularly evident in the larger nurseries where practices often limited the number of children allowed in a play area. In an instance of this, Colin (3y 11m), in a nursery class was explaining about the role play shop: *You are only meant to go in there if you have a band*. Also, Amy (3y 5m), in a private nursery, explained that the reason that only four children were allowed in the home corner was *because there's not enough room*. There were also several storage places, which the children identified as out of bounds at this setting.

For other children showing their **awareness of the reasons for rules** was more significant and in some cases more detailed. Michael (4y 6m), in the Steiner kindergartens, knew why there was a rule about adding water to sand: *We're not allowed to put too much water because otherwise it would smell and go a bit black*. In her childminder's garden, Carly (4y 6m) demonstrated her understanding of rules while on a swing, by calling to an adult: *Do I have to go slow? Cos if we go high, we'll knock baby Corin over*.

Children in reception classes showed particular knowledge of **behavioural consequences**. In one reception class, children said that the consequences for smacking were that: *You have to stand on the shiny line... You miss five minutes of your choose time*. In a second reception class, children were aware of consequences for positive and negative behaviour, as represented by weather symbols. Caroline (4y 10m) explained that children who fight: *Go on the full cloud*, and that *Mrs Green would be sad*. She noted signs for *good listening, good walking, good sitting* and explained that children receiving good signs could put a peg on the sunshine. Children here also talked about golden time as a reward for good behaviour when they could play games such as *Cats got the weasel... a game that was played a very long time ago* (Caroline 4y 10m). Although children were keen to show their knowledge of these consequences, which were presented in a visual and accessible way, they seemed less likely to give their explanation of the reasons for rules, as cited above.

Some children's comments suggested that they thought adults were more interested in *how* they played than in *what* they played with. For example, when asked what she had done at nursery, Carly (4y 6m) explained to her childminder how she had *played nicely* at nursery. Later in the day, she also showed awareness of the consequences for not playing 'nicely' when she engaged in extended role play relating to a naughty child who had knocked over her baby (a doll): *Where do we put this naughty boy? On time out... Put him in time out again*. Children in some settings thought it was significant that they could explore materials

without worrying about getting dirty. In a children's centre, Penny (3y 4m) informed the researcher: *You can get it dirty... teddy can get dirty.*

In these various ways, children interpreted rules as of immense significance to getting on in their settings. They were keen to demonstrate their knowledge of rules and the consequences of breaking them. They also wanted to share this knowledge with others. Sometimes children found it easier to comply with rules if settings provided enabling routines and unrestricted access to a range of resources (see Questions 1 and 3). For example, in a private nursery, Matthew and Katie said that if there was someone on the bikes they wanted that *they'd get another one.*

### **3.2.5 Summary**

There was a range of evidence relating to the ways in which early years settings met needs and interests for children as individuals and in groups. Children demonstrated that they particularly valued social activities such as mealtimes, and missed friends and older children who had moved to other settings. This would suggest that opportunities for a range of relationships with older and younger children should be given more importance in settings and that children's well-being could be supported by enabling more opportunities in settings for caring for others through social activities.

Children showed overwhelming interest in their own families, and mothers were often missed. Opportunities for sibling relationships, except in the out-of-school club and childminding settings, were limited and parents' continued presence in settings, apart from in a voluntary pre-school, were also limited. We therefore suggest that it is important to give varied opportunities for parents, carers and siblings to spend time in settings.

Children tended to see adults as teachers or figures of authority, with the exception of childminder settings, in which adults were more likely to be viewed as play partners and supporters. Generally, there was little evidence that a key person relationship was of significance to children and they mostly had good relationships with a range of adults. However, where there were fewer adults, the quality of this relationship seemed firmer and more closely linked to being known as individuals and supporting learning. This echoes the guidance (National Strategies, 2008, p.50) which suggests that knowing children really well enables practitioners to start with what children are really interested in rather than what they think 'should be taught'. We therefore suggest that research needs to be carried out into how the key person approach is being operationalised across different types of early years settings, taking into account adult-child ratios and size of settings.

Whereas children were very interested in and 'knew' routines and rules, they less frequently understood the rationale behind them. This affected the scope of their independence. The EYFS does state that rules and boundaries should be explained to children (DCSF, 2008c, 1.3), and we suggest that more time needs to be taken to help children understand reasons for rules.

### 3.3 Question 3: To what extent do children's experiences in early years settings include physical activity, including physical activity outdoors?

#### 3.3.1 Physical activity outdoors

##### Finding 1:

Most, though not all, children talked about their enjoyment of physical activities, particularly outdoors. Children talked about cycling, climbing, chasing, jumping and balancing, hoops and balls. The extent of these opportunities varied from setting to setting.

Many settings provided a range of opportunities for physical activity outdoors and children were keen to show and comment on activities and resources. For example, in one private nursery, children enjoyed **child-initiated physical activities** in a large garden, with many interesting places to visit, including wild areas. Several children talked about enjoyable features of this garden supporting physical play, including swings and a climbing frame. The bridge over a large puddle was a favourite place, with opportunities to splash in water. Mark said: *I love going on that bridge... I go round, I get to the puddle and bounce on it in wellies.* Children had also been actively involved in developing a vegetable garden.

Carly (4y 6m) and Laura (3y 7m) enjoyed child-initiated physical activity with large and small equipment in their childminder's garden. The childminder had two older sons and the garden appeared to have been designed partly with these children in mind. Alongside a lawn, play house and gardening area, the outdoors included more challenging large scale equipment than seen in other settings. Carly (4y 6m) described her play: *Carly likes swinging on the swings. I love those swings... I love playing with the hula hoops.*

Michael (4y 6m), Gina (3y 6m) and Maisie (2y 11m), in another childminding setting, talked about several features of the garden supporting child-initiated physical activities. Although there was no large scale equipment, the medium-sized front and back gardens offered varied opportunities for physical play, including moveable materials and resources. Michael excitedly described play in an area of the garden with tyres, crates and logs on bark: *Climbing... I just fell down... You just seed me fall down on the tyres.* His laughing indicated that the falling down was an essential part of the game (See Figure 6). Gina (3y 6m) liked playing football on the grass in the back garden: *I like playing football with Michael.*



Figure 6 A childminder's provision for physically active play

Children in a reception class described a range of enjoyable features of the outdoor play space. This mainly comprised a hard surfaced playground surrounded by a thin strip of bushes. With a range of resources added, however, this area provided varied opportunities for child-initiated physical activity. Skipping ropes were a favourite resource for Simon (4y 11m): *Outside play because there's loads of skipping ropes.* For these children, the outdoor

environment was extended through regular visits to a nearby wood, providing opportunities for **adult-led physical activity**. Fiona (4y 3m) described games, incorporating physical activity, introduced by the adults, such as hunting for natural world objects in the woods.

Children in many settings enjoyed play with a range of resources outdoors. Where available, they talked most often about their enjoyment of bike play as a favourite activity. Some children described enjoyable play on climbing or balancing equipment. Jules (4y 7m), in a reception class, enjoyed play on a wooden climbing frame. *The monkey bars. That's where you put your arms through to get through. I jump on that bit and then I roll over on there.* One childminding setting provided several opportunities for balancing which children demonstrated and talked about.

Other kinds of equipment and resources supporting physical activity were less commonly found. There was limited availability of moveable materials and resources such as the hollow blocks enjoyed by Fiona (5y 3m): *You can build with them.* Megan (4y 0m), in a nursery class, enjoyed jumping off tree stumps in the grass. She skipped outside to the tree stumps: *On the high one.* She stood on the stump, wiggled her body and jumped. In a small number of settings, children enjoyed opportunities to play with small apparatus, including small balls, beanbags, hoops and skipping ropes. Simon (4y 11m) liked outdoor play in his reception class *because there's loads of skipping ropes.*

Many children set themselves challenges to practice physical skills outdoors, for example hopping, jumping, balancing, climbing, swinging and kicking footballs. They talked about their mastery of these skills, sharing their sense of competence. Grace (4y 3m) at a private nursery, described the diverse ways in which she and her friends enjoyed exploring the outdoor space of the front garden: *playing outside on the front as well you can run around and play games on there, hide and seek, running around and hopping and playing tinker bell.* Children often seemed intrinsically motivated to extend their movement skills during play of this kind, particularly when playing chasing and hide and seek games with friends. Children also enjoyed challenge during their physical play outdoors, particularly in relation to speed and height. Some children commented on their enjoyment of speed, for example being pushed hard on a bike or coming fast down a slide. In addition, some enjoyed the experience of being high up, for example on swings or jumping on a trampoline.

Many children shared their enjoyment of physically active play and their sense of competence. However, Yo Lee (4y 3m), at his voluntary pre-school, was less enthusiastic about play of this kind, stating a preference for less active play: *I don't like kicking football. I only like watching television. I like sleeping and building, and sitting colouring and drawing.* It may be relevant that Yo Lee attended the setting with the most limited outdoor play opportunities. This was the setting with no regular provision for physical activity indoors and where, due to limited space, only four children could play outside at any time.

In some settings, adults supported physically active play and took on roles as **play partners or supporters**. This was found most often in childminding settings, where adults were in relatively close proximity to children, who talked throughout the day about their developing skills. For example, Gina (3y 6m) set herself the challenge of moving around the childminder's garden, balancing on logs, plank borders and a balance beam. She shared achievements with her childminder: *I'm balancing. I'm balancing on that.* Michael (4y 6m) described enjoyment of both football and 'hide and seek' games with his childminder: *I like to play hide and seek with Tim in the back garden because he's my friend.* Another childminder was an appreciative audience for Moira (5y 5m), showing off *silly walks* on the way home from school.

### 3.3.2 Barriers to physical activity outdoors

#### **Finding 2:**

Some children commented positively on being free to choose when to play outside. In several settings, children described feeling unhappy about waiting for particular times of day for outdoor activity.

As well as talking about what they enjoyed, children also talked about some aspects of their settings that limited opportunities for active outdoor play. Some of the issues raised relate to **rules** and **routines**, features of early years settings which are also discussed in relation to Question 2.

Children in two settings commented on **rules** which placed limitations on numbers of children allowed outside. Sophie (3y 10m), in a voluntary pre-school, explained: *Just four people can go outside. You have to wait till it's your turn.* The setting was registered for 24 children but numbers were restricted outdoors due to the unusually small size of the play space. In a reception class with over 60 children, the number of children allowed outdoors was limited to fifteen, as a result of a complaint from a school neighbour about noise. In two other settings, children commented on restricted access to play in favourite spaces. One private nursery had a large garden with contrasting opportunities for physical activity in different areas. Children preferred *the top garden* to the front garden but used this less often. Anna (4y 1m) explained: *It's the top one I like. Playing on the big slide. It's better than the other one.* There were similar restrictions at an out-of-school club with rules about access to a large climbing frame in an area that children could only visit with an adult. Shazma identified this as a favourite place: *It's the woods. It's the top. I can go there with Preya.*

Children noted further rules in a reception class where they commented on their experience of the large playground, used at midday playtimes. This offered opportunities for running but provided none of the equipment children enjoyed in the reception class outdoor area. Sarah (5y 2m) noted: *You have a rule you're not allowed to play with anything at dinner time.* At several settings, children saw opportunities for physically active play outdoors as limited by **routines**. They had to wait for particular times of day to play outside and knew that they could not negotiate these routines. Pat (4y6m), Anisa (4y4m) and John (3y10m) were asked when it would be time to play outdoors at their independent nursery. All said: *After dinner.* Amy (4y 6m), at a private nursery, also knew that outdoor play was only available at particular times: *Sometimes we go outside.* Children at several settings commented on restricted opportunities for play during poor weather. At a voluntary pre-school, Sophie (3y 10m) explained: *We aren't going out today because it's raining... it's too wet.* In addition to the restrictions of rules and/or routines, in some settings a relatively narrow range of outdoor activities placed limits on children's physical experiences outdoors. For example, at the out-of-school club, children talked mainly about football, cricket and chasing games. In the voluntary pre-school, where space and resources were limited, most children seemed to associate the outdoors primarily with bike play. Luke (4y 1m) expressed a view shared by many children: *I like going outside, play outside. We always go on the scooter and the bikes.* Similarly, Tommy (4y 3m), at a private nursery, explained: *I play with the motorbikes. I like that one because I play with it everyday at the top.*



### 3.3.3 Physical activity indoors

#### **Finding 3:**

In a few settings, children described enjoyment of indoor physical activities. This included hall games in a reception class, large-scale construction play in a Steiner setting and dancing in two childminding settings.

Settings varied in the opportunities provided for physical activity indoors. While some offered regular opportunities for enjoyable physical activities, opportunities were often limited. Of relevance to this, the size and organisation of indoor spaces varied greatly across settings. Settings ranged in terms of scale from the domestic space of a childminder's home to the large open plan space of a school nursery. In many settings, the organisation of indoor spaces discouraged physically active play. Often rooms were divided by screens and furniture to create a number of relatively small areas, each with a particular focus of play. Children who led tours of their settings stopped to talk about and sometimes to play in favourite play areas. However, even in larger settings, children only occasionally talked about physically active play or demonstrated this during tours indoors.

In some settings children enjoyed **adult-led physical activities**, either in play rooms or in other spaces, available at particular times of day. Some children participated in dancing, action rhymes and/or singing games indoors, usually as part of an adult-led session. In one childminding setting, Michael (4y 6m), Gina (3y 6m) and Maisie (2y 11m) enjoyed a lively dancing and action rhyme session, led by the childminder, using music from a CD. There was lots of laughter as children tried to perform actions requiring co-ordination of different body parts. Children in one reception class had access to an indoor hall area that was used for a number of physical activity sessions. Fiona (4y 3m) explained how: *At golden time we play games and we put some music on.* Holly (3y 11m) also explained how she and Angie (3y 5m) were taken by their childminder to a Gym Tots session in a visit beyond the setting: *That's me swinging like a monkey... Its Gym Tots... You do exercises.*

There were some examples of **child-initiated physical activity** indoors. Holly (3y 11m) and Angie (3y 5m) enjoyed dressing up and dancing to music on CDs, first ballet music and then rock and roll. At another childminding setting Michael (4y 6m), Gina (3y 6m) and Maisie (2y 11m) enjoyed a short period of rough and tumble play with their childminder in the living room. This session, like the dancing and action rhyme session described above, was accompanied by much laughter and seemed to appeal to the children's **sense of humour**.

A voluntary pre-school, with limited outdoor play, had an indoor climbing frame. However, children did not view this as continuous provision. Sally (4y 4m) explained: *We can go on it... only when it comes out.* Thomas (3y 4m) liked the setting's trampoline but also noted its variable availability: *Playing on the trampoline, but we haven't got it today at nursery.*

In a private nursery, a group of boys, with relatively **limited access to outdoor play**, played boisterously indoors. Jack (4 y 6m) made a pirate's gun with a construction set and ran excitedly through different rooms: *Treasure map! I've got a spade here! (pretends to dig).* His play included jumping, hopping and falling over, with lots of noise and laughter. This suggests that a lack of planning for physical activity indoors and limited access to the outdoors can lead to boisterous play indoors, with the potential to disrupt other kinds of play.

In contrast to most other settings, children in the Steiner kindergartens enjoyed varied, daily opportunities for child-initiated physical activity indoors. The organisation of each classroom, with open ended resources at the edges of the room and a relatively large, **undefined central space**, offered distinctive opportunities for play of this kind. Playing in small groups, children moved large resources to the centre of the rooms, including boxes, planks, chests,

blocks, small chairs, clothes-horses and fabrics. Looking at a photograph, Anna (4y 8m) commented on role play in her camper van, built with a range of large construction materials: *Playing camper van, we're playing in it.* Michael (4y 6m) described climbing a ladder during role play as a decorator, painting the kindergarten wall: *Not very high. Only a wooden ladder.* As well as constructing with a range of relatively large resources, children sometimes pulled and pushed each other in large boxes indoors. Lilly (5y 6m) explained: *Pulling a person along, either Rob or Jack. Always someone in a box.*

### 3.3.4 Summary

The comments of our sample children suggest that many enjoyed wide opportunities for physical activity outdoors but more limited opportunities indoors. Although a high proportion of children enjoyed active outdoor play, some settings appeared to offer a relatively narrow diet of physical activities outdoors, with children's talk dominated by reference to play on wheeled toys or competitive ball games. Children's accounts raise questions about some favourite activities as potentially repetitive and perhaps unchallenging. This is likely to be an issue where choices are limited. In some settings, children's views suggest that rules and fixed routines may further limit opportunities for physically active play outdoors.

The use of moveable materials and resources, including larger resources such as blocks, planks and tyres, offers potential for play that is both physically and mentally challenging. However, children in just a few settings talked about provision of this kind indoors and few referred to regular provision outdoors. A wider range of opportunities for active play, indoors and outdoors, might draw in children who appear less intrinsically motivated to engage in physical activity.

Children's talk suggests that adult involvement in physical activity is another dimension of difference across settings. National Strategies Early Years (2009, p15) states that "Children like playing with adults... and actively seek adults as co-players," a point that is supported by examples from settings where children talked positively about adults as play partners or supporters. However, across the settings, relatively few children talked about adult involvement in physical activities. While adult involvement has many purposes, children's comments suggest that it may be particularly important in terms of developing inclusive physical activities and strengthening children's disposition to engage in physical play. Findings challenge any assumption that all children enjoy the range of physical activities provided by settings and they suggest a need for practitioners to talk with children to identify and plan activities that all children will enjoy.

## 3.4 Question 4: To what extent do children's views inform planning and delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage by practitioners?

This research question was central to the project's aim to represent children's perspectives in a participatory way. The EYFS supports children's participatory rights in statements such as 'making time to listen to children's views and to act on them, even when they do not match adult views' (DCSF, 2008c, 2.3) and in the commitment to 'children's entitlements' (DCSF, 2008c, 1.2). But it often characterises children as being on the receiving end of services, rather than as participants in service delivery. In contrast to this view, Carly (4y 6m) showed pride in taking responsibility for real jobs within the setting by saying to her childminder: *Sheila, I swepted all the floor up.* Key findings and recommendations relating to this question follow, supported by evidence from the study.

### 3.4.1 Children as competent learners

#### Finding 1:

Children in our sample often saw themselves as capable of being involved in planning their own activities. Children seemed to find it easier to choose and lead their own activities when the space was less clearly organised into areas designated for specific play themes.

There are numerous examples across settings of children expressing confidence about themselves as learners, demonstrating their ability and desire to act independently. This is sometimes called having a **sense of agency** (see Question 1) and was well exemplified by Katie (3y 5m), as she offered to share her expert knowledge of her private nursery: *I can do everything in my nursery - just ask me if you want to see anything - because I am one who knows where it is, aren't I Lesley* (staff member)?

If children are given time and opportunity, this sense of agency enables them to plan, direct and gain control over many aspects of their own learning. As was suggested under Question 2, in settings where there was greater flexibility in the routines, along with friendly adult support, children were able to demonstrate their competence.

However, with regard to different patterns of child development, there were examples where it was challenging for practitioners to find accessible ways for children to demonstrate competent learning, particularly where communication was an area of difficulty. One childminder worked effectively with Billy (4y 6m), a child with communication difficulties, to extend his range of activities, by giving him **familiar routines** and letting him choose his own activities. She felt encouraged by the local authority to follow and plan for children's interests which included playing Wii electronic games. Billy was helped to make choices by the provision of **visible activities**. He was also able to negotiate with his childminder and ask to do activities he liked, such as *making cakes*.

In some settings, children had opportunities to demonstrate **agency** through experiences and activities in settings that followed **individual and/or group interests** and were **sustained over time** and/or **across contexts**. For example, three children, exploring materials during outdoor play supported by a childminder, were excited to see the effects of water, poured first onto dry sand and later in the morning onto garden soil. At the sand tray, Gina (3y 6m) noted: *It's all nice and soaking wet. All nice and soaked*. Often children were able to follow a variety of interests, because of access to **flexible materials and resources**. For example, Richard (5y 0m) playing with Lego in his reception class stated: *(I like) playing in the construction, Lego... I make castles and big cars and buildings*.

In contrast to these experiences of agency, there were **barriers to free flow play** in one private nursery where some children noted broken toys. Aziza (4y 4m) went to fetch food for her dog from the home corner fridge but was frustrated by the missing handle: *Who's taken that off. We can't open it. Look dog*. In the same setting, Amy said: *This is the sink, cooker and the fridge but we can't really open it because the string's gone... a long time ago the string broke, but the aunties made us one but it broke again*.

### 3.4.2 Children as planners

#### Finding 2:

- Children enjoyed planning their activities, but often they were not as involved in the planning process as they could have been.

Children did not often comment on being given opportunities to be involved in planning their own learning. There was only one setting where children talked about adults listening to their views in terms of being **participants in longer term planning**. This was a reception class where the teacher had consulted with the children in order to alter the sandpit in the outdoor area. Nevertheless, as was seen in relation to Questions 1 and 2, it was evident that children did sometimes influence planning more informally, through dialogue and play with responsive practitioners. These were examples of practitioners planning and building children's participation and involvement into ongoing events throughout the day as part of an ethical approach to listening to children (Clark and Moss, 2001).

However, in many cases, children cited the practitioner as the person who made decisions about the planning and availability of the areas, sometimes driven by safety or resource considerations. For example, in an independent nursery, children had to ask the teacher to take the lid off an outdoor sand pit. Also, the computer was only available to them when the teacher *put it on*. In a private nursery, children said: *If the teachers already feed the fish, then we can't*. Colin (3y 11m) indicated that a role play area in a nursery class was planned by an adult: *It was a fire engine park one day. Now it's a safari*. He also told us: *It's a bit different day* when he noted a pallet tray at the easel. Sally (3y 10m) commented on the lack of painting as a play choice on a particular day, saying: *No, you're not allowed to paint anymore. They don't like paint anymore but I like to paint... I paint at home*.

In one private nursery, activities and experiences planned by adults were characterised by staff as 'preparation for school'. As also reported in Question 2, children identified **adults as instructors** with regard to large group literacy and numeracy activities. Aziza (4y 4m) in a private nursery explained: *The teachers teach me. They readed a book*. In contrast, some children described experiences and activities which were planned by them using the materials and resources already available. Simon (4y 6m) planned his play with a friend in response to a story read by the nursery class teacher: *Two of us were building the ark because we had the idea to do it*. Louise (4y 6m) commented on the interesting things that she could choose to play with indoors at her Steiner kindergarten: *I'll go get interesting things. It's a sheet to hang up... and a clothes horse to make a house*. Two reception class children were pleased with the range of resources they could use to write letters and practice writing words: *Here's all the stuff* (Lisa 4y 3m).... *envelopes, pens, whiteboards* (Sarah 4y 2m).

This sense of freedom for children to plan and to make choices was often more evident outdoors, especially when children were able to follow their own preoccupations or construct areas away from adults, such as shelters and dens. For example, in one reception class a child commented positively about the play house: *You can go there on your own with a friend. No teachers*. One children's centre had developed a large stock cupboard outside which children were free to go in and out of and choose from a wide range of different materials, games and equipment.

There were a few cases where children saw play and activities as jointly planned between children and adults. These were where adults acted as **play/activity partners or supporters** (see also Question 2). Holly (3y 11m), recalled a shared experience with her childminder: *That's us chopping parsley... We were making fish triple decker... It's from Katie*

(TV programme). In another setting, Laura also talked about her childminder as a play partner with the hoops: *Some are for big ones and some are for little ones. You need big hula hoops* (to the childminder).

### 3.4.3 Children as record keepers

#### **Finding 3:**

Many children we spoke to did not recognise the setting record as their own and some children were unhappy that they could not understand the written information.

Most settings kept individual records of learning and development that included written and visual material, often called 'Learning Journeys'. These were not normally made accessible to children but were often shared with parents. Researchers used these records as a prompt for children to talk about their interests, development and learning. However, in many cases it seemed that children had **limited 'ownership' of learning journeys**. In the main, children were not involved in decisions as to what to select and sometimes seemed puzzled by what was included. At one children's centre, for example, many photographs represented special events and activities undertaken by all children, such as a visit from Father Christmas, rather than personally significant experiences. Sylvie (4y 0m) explained: *That one – a reindeer. My mummy was come but I didn't like it* (Father Christmas).

Because the 'Learning Journeys' were usually designed for an adult audience, almost all included a selection of written documents. This reinforced children's sense of exclusion. For example, in a children's centre, Sarah (4y 0m) looking at her 'Learning Journey' said in an impatient tone: *I can't read it; I wouldn't know*. In an independent nursery, Leanne (3y 7m) commented: *There's loads of writing*.

In a few cases, there was evidence of children's 'ownership' of learning journeys, with photographs representing personally significant experiences, which children were excited to recall. Lilly (5y 6m) revisited play with a pulley at a Steiner kindergarten: *'You pull it up with a rope. You pull one side down and the basket goes up. And then you let go when it gets to the top. And then it shoots down really fast.'* However, in the same setting, Robert (5y 1m) looking at a photograph of the group story time commented: *I didn't even choose a story. I don't like stories*.

Two childminders had developed photo record books that were taken home to be shared with parents. One parent had reported her daughter so attached to the book that she took it to bed with her. The book seemed to support **transitions within the extended day** (see Question 2) for this child.

In these examples, where records were clearly targeted at parents and children, with plenty of photographs and drawings, children appeared much more interested in them. Most children, however, were less engaged with records; they had a lack of access or limited access to records, and limited involvement in their production. This seemed a missed opportunity for involving children in planning and assessment opportunities.

### 3.4.4 Summary

Despite some barriers, children in several settings exerted influence over everyday decisions about the content and direction of their play. This was often where the setting was less organised for specific play contexts and some spaces were left open to interpretation by the children, such as in the Steiner kindergartens (see Questions 1 and 3). Children also appreciated free and continuous access to outdoor space.

Although children's interests were often cited by practitioners as informing their planning, it has been difficult to find clear examples of children being aware of this. However, some examples suggest that practitioners who vary the roles they take with children, and engage with play that children initiate, are better able to support and involve them with decisions about ongoing planning. The data suggests that children could often be given a greater role in gathering and choosing documentation of their learning. Margaret Carr (2001, p138) states that different audiences for documentation require different formats and makes reference to the exclusion of children from records by the use of print.

Although the EYFS can be seen to support the above points, it could give more emphasis to children's participation in planning activities. As highlighted by MacNaughton et al (2007) and United Nations *General Comment 7 (United Nations Committee, 2005)*, children have the right to express their views about 'the development of policies and services' and staff should recognise the expert contribution children can make.

## 4. Conclusion

The National Strategies Early Years (2009, p4) guidance for early years practitioners states: 'effective early years practitioners will organise the time, space and activities in the daily routine to reflect the overall combination which best supports children's well-being and learning'. This report aims to present evidence of that combination in various early years settings from children's perspectives. Thereby, the aim is also to gain insight into children's views of their own well-being and learning in those contexts.

Children in our sample talked about their enjoyment of a range of play based experiences, for example 'pretend play', construction, drawing and painting, computer games and football. However, access to such experiences seemed to vary widely across settings. The play experiences that children enjoyed can be linked to all six Areas of Learning and Development, although children conveyed a strongest sense of enjoyment of play linked to Creative Development, Knowledge and Understanding of the World, Physical Development and aspects of Communication, Language and Literacy. Where children had access to varied and flexible resources and a relatively large, undefined area for play, they identified a wider range of play interests and more complex play. These flexible resources, which children used in diverse ways, included cardboard boxes, fabrics of different kinds and a variety of natural objects such as shells. In some settings, children also enjoyed adult engagement in their play, for example while playing in a pretend camp outdoors.

As well as play-based experiences, some children shared enjoyment of 'real world' experiences, including visits beyond the setting. Favourite activities included cooking, shopping, arranging flowers and caring for pets, often in the company of adults. Like play based experiences, these 'real world' experiences linked to each of the six Areas of Learning and Development. However, access to such experiences seemed to vary widely across settings, with children in childminding settings describing the widest range of these experiences. Play-based experiences were also shaped by the rules, boundaries and routines of the setting, which children were very keen to comment on. There were some indications that where children were able to understand *why* certain rules applied, they were most likely to find them helpful in developing their play and supporting their learning.

While demonstrating that they often felt their individual needs and interests were catered for, children were as keen to talk about their role within a group as they were about their individual needs and interests. Children talked about social activities, about opportunities to care for others, about missing children who had moved to other settings, and about their wish to enjoy time with parents and siblings in settings. It was also notable that they appeared to look forward to their own transitions to school in the future. Adult roles in settings were clearly important to children and, mostly, children appeared to have good relationships with a range of adults. In smaller settings, these relationships seemed more likely to translate into adults knowing children well, implementing the guidance (National Strategies, 2008, p.50) which suggests that knowing children really well enables practitioners to start with what children are really interested in rather than what they think 'should be taught'.

In terms of physical development and learning, most, though not all, children talked about enjoying physical activities, particularly outdoors. They commented on many favourite kinds of play, including cycling, climbing, chasing, jumping, balancing, as well as games with skipping ropes, balls and hoops. Children told us what they were good at and were clearly proud of their competence in terms of physical skill. They sometimes demonstrated skills, such as hopping like a kangaroo or jumping across stepping stones. Nevertheless, opportunities for children to engage in physical activity outdoors varied from setting to

setting. While some children made positive comments about being free to play outside when they chose, children in several settings described feeling unhappy about waiting for particular times of day or waiting due to restrictions on numbers. In addition, while some children commented on the varied physical activities they enjoyed outdoors, children in a few settings talked in ways that suggested a lack of challenge and variety in available activities. An example is a small number of settings where children talked predominantly about bicycle play outdoors. Children in a few settings also described or demonstrated enjoyment of indoor physical activities, including hall games in a reception class, large-scale construction play in a Steiner setting and dancing in two childminding settings. Children's perspectives on physical activities indoors and outdoors suggest a need for practitioners to talk with children in order to identify and plan a range of physical activities that all children can enjoy.

There was great variation in children's views about how far they could influence the planning of activities. The best examples of children informing the planning, delivery and recording of the EYFS occurred where practitioners were able to respond to, negotiate and engage with children's interests sensitively. In addition, children were more able to affect the planning and delivery when adults varied the roles they took with them, in some cases acting as 'play-partners' rather than supervisors. Relatively undefined spaces also enabled children greater freedom in planning for their play. When personal setting records were shared with individual children, it was significant that there were some examples where children did not recognise their record as their own.

Although many of the findings reported here are consistent with themes, commitments and guidance in the EYFS, it was also clear that there are omissions in the EYFS, in part due to the emphasis on children as receivers of a curriculum generated by adults. The theme of children taking responsibility is one such omission which we have pointed to as evident in children's clear desire to engage with the world around them, to demonstrate their knowledge of the world around them and to maintain a range of types of relationships.



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## Appendix 1

### Pretend Play Themes Grid

This shows in table format the full set of pretend play themes within CD, examples of children's pretend play and any strong links to additional Areas of Learning and Development.

Pretend play theme	Examples	Setting	Links
<b>Houses, home-corners and babies</b>	Luke (4y 1m) identified a favourite activity: <i>playing over there (points to home-corner) with dolls.</i>	Private nursery	
<b>Cooking and eating</b>	Kim (4y 6m) described her play with dough: <i>I like making pretend cakes, banana cakes and a bit of sugar on.</i>	Private nursery	KUW
<b>Cats, dogs and other animals</b>	Aziza (4y 4m) said to a child pretending to be a dog: <i>I'll get your dish. I'll feed you. This is your water.</i>	Private nursery	
<b>Trees, plants and flowers</b>	Conducting the plants as a choir with an improvised baton, Holly (3y 11m) explained: <i>I'm teaching all the plants to sing. Lalalalala.</i>	Childminding setting	
<b>CBeebies, Batman and others</b>	Mark (3y 11m) reported <i>That's me with my Buzz Lightyear... I went round the garden, I found some baddies.</i>	Private nursery	
<b>Guns, swords and cannons</b>	Jack played at pirates (4y 6m): <i>Treasure map! I've got a spade here!</i>	Private nursery	
<b>Princesses, fairies and ballerinas</b>	Sophie (3y 10m) described the dressing up clothes: <i>Those are fairy shoes, they fit on me too... I want to be a fairy.</i>	Voluntary pre-school	
<b>Monsters, dragons and dinosaurs</b>	Gina (3y 6m) described some favourite scary games: <i>And David pretends to be a dinosaur.</i>	Childminding setting	
<b>Shops</b>	Sarah (4y 0m) liked play in the shop: <i>I can be the shop keeper.</i>	Children's centre	KUW
<b>Bikes, buses, cars and planes</b>	Michael (4y 6m) explained: <i>It's my bus that I made....I'm the driver.</i>	Steiner kindergarten	KUW
<b>Nurses, fire-fighters, teachers and priests</b>	Jim (5y 3m) enjoyed dressing up as a police-man: <i>Me being a police and I'm on my walkie-talkie.</i>	Reception class	
<b>Holidays, camping and fishing</b>	Peter (3y 11m) explained <i>That's where we go camping, we eat our dinners, there is a pretend fire</i>	Private nursery	KUW
<b>Shows and performances</b>	Sarah (5y 2m) recalled 'Showtime Arena': <i>Nearly everybody wanted to go on... There was a big red stage.</i>	Reception class	CLL
<b>Football, cricket and races</b>	Michael (4y 6m) kicked a ball to his childminder: <i>You're Chelsea. I'm Hull.</i>	Childminding setting	PD

## Appendix 2

### Real World Themes Grid

This shows in table format the full set of real world themes with links to Areas of Learning and Development identified.

Real world theme	Area of Learning & Development	Real world experience	Setting
<i>Cats, dogs and other animals</i>	KUW: Exploration and investigation	Sarah (4y 0m) described a visit to the zoo as her favourite activity: <i>I didn't like the giraffes... The ants wanted our dinner.</i> Simon (4y 11m) helped to look after chickens being hatched: <i>Actually, I like the chickens. They keep on pecking my fingers.</i>	Children's centre  Reception class
Trees, plants and flowers	KUW: Exploration and investigation	Carly (4y 6m) enjoyed helping arrange a vase of flowers: <i>Because I loved the flowers... Because I normally good and then Shona chooses somebody. And that was me.</i>	Childminding setting
<i>Cooking and eating</i>	KUW: Designing and making	Maisie (2y 11m) explained: <i>We made cakes with different colours. You will be excited when we eat them.</i>	Childminding setting
<i>Bikes, buses, cars and planes</i>	KUW: Place	Holly (3y 11m) was interested in truck tipping tarmac onto a new road on a walk to school.	Childminding setting
<i>Shops</i>	KUW: Place	At lunch time Michael (4y 6m), Gina (3y 6m) and Maisie (2y 11m) talked with their childminder about buying fruit in the market and supermarket.	Childminding setting
<i>Houses, home-corners and babies</i>	KUW: Communities and Time  KUW: Designing and making  PSRN: Numbers as Labels and for Counting	Laura (3y 7m), was keen to share her knowledge of the time for collection of older children from school: <i>Normally we have lunch before we pick the guys up. We do it when it's 3 o'clock.</i> Lily (5y 5M) enjoyed sewing: <i>I'm sewing my cushion cover... I do like these colours.</i> This activity was described by the Steiner teachers as handwork rather than play Holly (3y 11m) and Angie (3y 5m) read house numbers on doors on the way to school to collect an older child.	Childminding setting
<i>Shows and performances</i>		Connor talked about a magic show he'd been to.	Childminding setting
<i>Countries</i>	KUW: Communities	Leanne (3y 7m) talked about the orphanage in Africa which was sponsored by the setting, with active involvements of parents.	Independent nursery

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