

Guidance for parents and carers

Supporting
your child with
high ability

Early years focus

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Introduction

It must be acknowledged that it is our youngest children who develop at a fast rate – more rapidly, in fact, than at any other stage. All children have strengths to build on. The range of ability in early years is vast. There are peaks, troughs, stutters and false starts as each child’s abilities evolve. Some children master some skills early on in a special way and this can be labelled as “advanced development”. However, labelling children at such a young age in a rigid way can be problematic for the child and their relationships with others. Therefore, we at NACE prefer to recognise that all children have abilities that can be nurtured and developed. We believe that all children can benefit from opportunities which challenge and engage them, leading to raised achievement and greater expectations of themselves and their futures.

This short guide focuses on what you, as parents and carers¹, can do to support your young child as they experience these first years and the opportunities you can provide to help them achieve highly in the future.

It is well known, and widely supported by research, that YOU, as parents, have the most significant impact on your child and how they learn. You have a significantly greater impact, at this age, than the early years setting they might go to. This is because in the first five years of development, typically a child is at home for the majority of the time, and during this period 90% of their brain has already formed.²

¹This guide is intended both for parents and other carers; where we refer to “parents”, this should be read as applying to both parents and others with similar responsibilities.

²Brown, T. T. and Jernigan, T. L. Brain Development During the Preschool Years. *Neuropsychology Review* 22, 313-333 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11065-012-9214-1>

As parents, you are your child’s first teacher, their main role model, and provide daily learning opportunities in the home. To promote their learning at home and a positive parent-child relationship, you should be actively involved in playing, talking, listening, and interacting with them daily. By engaging in these behaviours, you are helping your child learn key life skills, like communicating, thinking, problem solving and how to interact with other children and adults. Modelling these behaviours is the best way for your child to acquire these themselves.

This NACE Essentials guide will provide answers to some of the most common questions about caring for and supporting your young child to achieve highly:

- How do you know if your child is developing well?
- What are the key components that lead to your child’s success?
- How can you help and support your child at home?
- How can you work with your child’s school?

You may wish to read this alongside our main NACE Essentials guide for parents and carers, which has a broader focus on supporting children at all ages, and may be useful as your child becomes older.

How do you know if your child is developing well?

There are seven areas of learning within the early years foundation stage (EYFS). This guide will focus on the three areas identified as the Prime Areas of Learning within the EYFS Curriculum: Communication and Literacy; Physical; and Personal, Social and Emotional Development.

An individual child's progress across these areas can often be very uneven as they respond to the variety of learning opportunities around them. To clarify, it is extremely rare, although not impossible, for one individual to be demonstrating advanced skill across all seven areas. This guide will support you in understanding what might characterise a more able learner in the EYFS.

More able learners may display a selection of the following characteristics:

Communication and Literacy

- Following a range of instructions which contain several parts, correctly in a sequence;
- Confidence to ask for clarification if needed;
- Listening attentively with sustained concentration in a range of situations;
- Asking and answering questions about why things happen;
- Transferring knowledge through conversation, often connecting ideas;
- Regularly keen to recount experiences and imagine new possibilities;
- Using a wide range of vocabulary in the correct context.

Physical

- High degree of control of their body; good control of gross and fine body movements and can handle a wide range of objects skilfully;
- Using the body with confidence in differentiated, expressive and imaginative ways;
- Good sense of shape, space, direction and timing; movements are fluent;
- Particularly high levels of fitness for their age;
- Specific strengths in particular areas, e.g. games or dance;
- Often able to perform advanced skills and techniques and transfer skills between activities;
- Good decision-makers; able to take the initiative; leadership;
- Taking risks with ideas and approaches;
- Showing perseverance and commitment;
- Involvement with a range of related extracurricular activities;
- Discussing choices and reasons for healthy eating and exercise;
- Independence in dressing and undressing and general self-care;
- Advanced fine motor skills, e.g. they know and use their preferred hand for writing, using a correct pencil grip.



Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Identifying activities that may be a challenge and undertaking them nonetheless;
- Working with peers to develop ideas and plans without adult support or intervention;
- Expressing an understanding of how plans might change if they were to repeat activities;
- Confidence to speak to larger groups about their views, including the things they do not find easy;
- Understanding that people have different views, and ability to discuss this;
- Demonstrating resourcefulness in finding support when they need help or information;
- Self-control advanced for their age; being able to 'stop and think' before acting;
- Ability to wait for sustained periods for things they want/their turn;
- Confidence to change plans and strategies.

Below are some other common signs of advanced development in young children (taken from a number of research reviews). Your child may:

- Be an interested reader;
- Be very articulate or verbally fluent for his/her age;
- Give quick verbal responses (which can appear cheeky);
- Have a wide general knowledge;
- Learn quickly;
- Be interested in topics which one might associate with an older child;
- Communicate well with adults – often better than with their peer group;
- Have a range of interests, some of which are almost obsessions;
- Show unusual and original responses to problem solving activities;
- Be logical;
- Have a good memory;
- Be artistic and/or musical;
- Excel at sport;
- Have a lively and original imagination/sense of humour;
- Be very sensitive and aware;
- Focus on his/her own interests rather than on what is being taught.





What are the key components that lead to your child's success?

Success in school and in life is not down to ability alone. Self-confidence and self-belief, determination, willingness to work hard and personal motivation are essential. Opportunities to find out what you're good at, and the encouragement and support of others, are also vital. You, as parents and carers, can provide all of these.

Success is a result of the collision of:

- Opportunity;
- Ability;
- Positive family and school environment;
- Persistence;
- Self-esteem and self-belief.

The research of Carol Dweck, a US professor of psychology, indicates that attitudes towards "ability" and "effort" influence achievement. She observes:

- Many people assume that possessing high ability – along with confidence in that ability – is a recipe for success.
- Praising children's abilities reinforces this mindset, which can in fact prevent them from achieving.

In one study, several hundred secondary students were given 10 problems, on which most did fairly well. Some were praised for their "intelligence", while others were praised for their effort – "*That is a good score; you must have worked really hard.*" The children praised for their effort did not lose confidence when faced with harder questions and actually ended up doing better than their friends.

This is called focusing on a "growth mindset", which encourages effort rather than intelligence or talent.

How can you help and support your child at home?

The biggest contribution a parent can make to their child's education is to be interested in and appreciate what they are doing, know what they are interested in, and support them in what they do.

Gentle encouragement, interested questioning, concern when you feel there is a problem, and a habit of showing curiosity about the world yourself are all very important. **Talking with and listening to your child are among the most important factors in the development of language.**

Specifically, you could:

Help them develop language

Read with and to your child as often as possible. Have a new word of the day or week at home. Puzzles, logic games, word games and board games all help to develop language.

Help them extend knowledge of the world and encourage discussion

Talk through your day and theirs, and encourage family discussions. Introduce an interesting fact of the week. Give them a broad range of experiences, e.g. exhibitions, music, food.

Help them develop a range of skills and a balanced perspective

Do not always focus on their obvious skills – encourage them to sample new activities. Praise and value effort and persistence, not just achievement.

Help them to experiment

Give them space and free time to play, experiment and develop hobbies and interests of their own.

Help them develop their social and emotional needs

Children need to know that you are proud of who they are and not what they achieve. They need to be allowed to fail and make mistakes, and develop strategies to cope when they get it wrong.

Help by spending regular special time with your child

Setting aside special quality one-on-one time with your child will show them you value and appreciate them and will increase the connection between you.

Help by showing an interest in their activities

By playing with your child you show them you are interested in their activities. This will give them the confidence to explore and make mistakes and will give you an insight into what interests them.

Help by developing a warm, loving parent-child relationship

When you respond to your child's needs in a warm, loving and consistent manner you strengthen the attachment you have with them. This provides a foundation to allow children to grow confidently and learn to manage their own feelings and behaviours.

Help them develop good two-way communication

Role modelling good communication skills is essential. Be an active listener, let your child voice their opinion and respond to any questions they may have. Ask questions to show them you understand their viewpoint.

How can you work with your child's school?

You should expect the school to keep you informed about how well your child is progressing and what the school will do to support continued progress.

Questions you could ask of the school include:

- How can I help?
- How well can I expect my child to do?
- How is my child's progress being monitored?
- How is my child doing against national benchmarks?
- How will you keep me informed about my child's progress?
- What further advice and guidance is available for parents/carers?

There are three key areas in which schools should concentrate their support for your child: the quality of teaching and learning in class; educational opportunities provided beyond the classroom; and attention to their social and emotional wellbeing.

You should expect to see:

In the everyday classroom

It is vital that children, including those already demonstrating advanced abilities, are provided with optimal and positive learning environments and opportunities across all seven areas of learning set out within the EYFS Framework. This is to ensure that children are equipped to learn and develop to their maximum capacity. You should expect the school to provide daily tasks and activities which "extend" or "enrich" your child's learning; choice by the child over what they do; assessment which helps you know how they are progressing. Despite the recent removal of the "exceeding" end of Reception judgement early years practitioners will still be expected to continue to identify and stretch more able children.

Beyond the classroom

The school should also be able to point you in the direction of further resources and enrichment opportunities for children.

Social and emotional support

Most schools are sensitive to the social and emotional needs of children and have well-developed support systems in place. Discuss with your child's teacher what they can do, if you have any concerns.





What support is available from NACE?

An independent charity founded in 1983, the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE) works with member schools, education leaders and practitioners to improve provision for more able learners, driving whole-school improvement and raising achievement for all.

NACE believes that all children and young people, regardless of background, should be recognised and have the opportunity to realise their potential. We conduct research and offer practical resources, guidance, training and consultancy to help schools review and improve the quality of policy and provision for more able learners within a context of challenge and high standards for all.

Our resources include a set of practical resources for practitioners in EYFS, to support the identification of and effective provision for highly able learners at this stage.



Your child's school can access our support by:

- Becoming a member – providing year-round access to our library of online resources, recorded training webinars and more;
- Working with us on training for school staff – we offer bespoke live sessions, online or in school, as well as on-demand recorded sessions;
- Participating in the NACE Challenge Development Programme – a comprehensive programme which supports schools to develop high-quality provision for more able learners, and can lead to NACE Challenge Award accreditation.

If your child's school could benefit from support in this area, please ask them to visit our website (www.nace.co.uk) or contact us at info@nace.co.uk / 01235 425000.

A selection of free sample resources is also available for schools to download at www.nace.co.uk/sample-resources



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Well-respected in the field of more able education, Hilary Lowe has written, advised and presented widely in the field. Her career spans senior posts in comprehensive schools, teacher training and university lecturing. She has served as Associate Dean at the Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes University, and as Director for the Excellence in Cities National Training Programme for Gifted and Talented Coordinators. She has also been a member of several education advisory groups, and has designed national training and guidance materials.

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