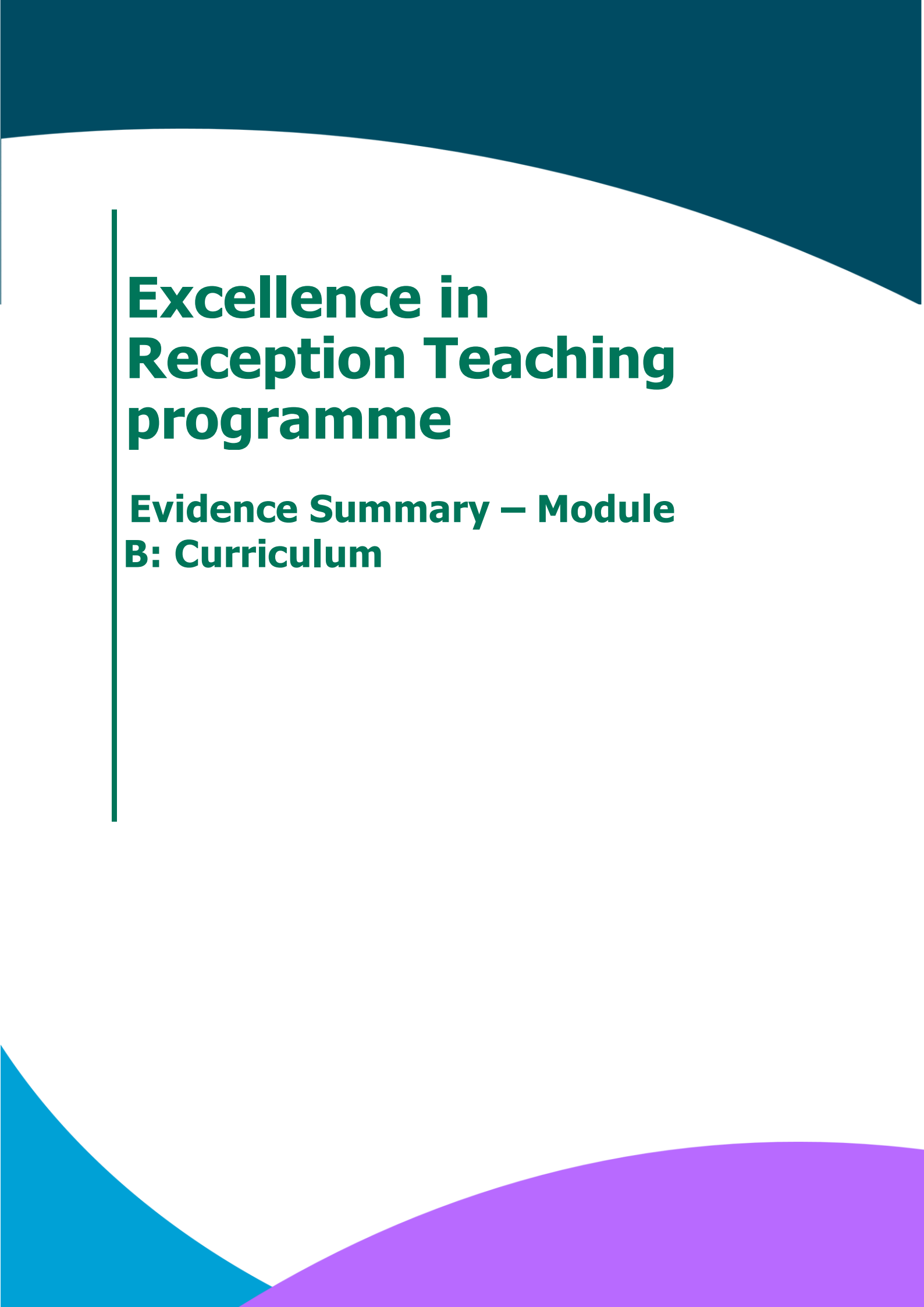




Excellence in Reception Teaching programme

**Evidence Summary – Module
B: Curriculum**

How to use this Evidence Summary

As you've worked through this chapter, you will have read about how the evidence has been applied to different scenarios and seen how it can be put into practice in classroom settings.

In this section, you can explore what the evidence says in more detail.

Use the links below to navigate to the chapter you wish to look at and then identify the area that you'd like to read more about, drawing on your diagnostic and reflections to guide your decision. Each chapter is separated into the same key themes that you read on Prism to help you focus your thinking. Chapter 1: Physical Development

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Chapter 1: Physical Development

<u>Key Theme 1: Physical environment can support purposeful movement and control</u>	<u>Key theme 2: Participation barriers need careful interpretation before labelling</u>
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Key theme 1: Physical environment can support purposeful movement and control

Scenario 1

Choose the evidence you wish to revisit

Use your reflections and self-diagnostic to select which evidence summaries to revisit.

Click the link to revisit the evidence base:

<u>Physical development is built through repeated movement opportunities</u>	<u>Outdoor space needs to be used intentionally</u>	<u>Play is important, but some movement skills need adult teaching</u>
<u>Being outside is not the same as participating physically</u>	<u>Physical competence can support confidence, independence and belonging</u>	

Physical development is built through repeated movement opportunities

Physical development includes children's growing strength, coordination, balance, spatial awareness, stability, gross motor control and fine motor control (DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024). These skills develop incrementally through sensory experience, movement, play, interaction with adults and objects, and repeated opportunities to practise indoors and outdoors (Evangelou et al., 2009; DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

The evidence highlights that children need varied opportunities to practise different types of physical skill. This includes locomotor skills, such as running and jumping; stability skills, such as balancing, twisting and maintaining control; and manipulation skills, such as throwing, catching, pushing, pulling and using objects with increasing coordination (DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

A setting may appear physically active while still offering a narrower range of movement opportunities for some children. For this reason, adults need to notice not only whether children are moving, but which movements they are practising, how often, and whether all children can access an appropriate level of challenge.

Evidence suggests that adult modelling, encouragement, feedback and careful adaptation can support children to try a wider range of physical skills without turning play into an adult-led session (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024).

The evidence shows that physical development supports children's health, confidence, self-care, participation and wider learning (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024). In practice, teachers support this by creating plentiful indoor and outdoor opportunities, explicitly teaching movement skills, varying difficulty, and strengthening gross motor development through purposeful physical activity (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Outdoor space needs to be used intentionally

You may have worked in settings where outdoor space is limited, shared or difficult to organise. You may also have seen that a large outdoor area does not automatically lead to rich physical development. The evidence does not suggest that strong physical development depends simply on the amount of space available. It points instead to the quality, frequency and purpose of the movement opportunities children experience (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

Development Matters highlights the importance of regular access to outdoor space, varied surfaces, open-ended materials and opportunities for children to lift, carry, push, pull, construct, stack, climb and move in different ways (DfE, 2023). Ofsted also emphasises that children need planned opportunities to develop fundamental movement skills through practice, teaching and adult interaction (Ofsted, 2024).

The evidence highlights that outdoor provision can support physical development when it gives children repeated opportunities to practise movement with purpose. This includes opportunities to strengthen balance, coordination, agility, core stability and whole-body control through varied physical activity (DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

The evidence also suggests that access to outdoor space is not enough on its own. Children may benefit when adults understand the movement skills that

different resources and spaces are likely to support, and when they provide modelling, encouragement, feedback and appropriate levels of challenge (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024).

Development Matters emphasises that children need frequent and varied opportunities to develop both large-muscle and small-muscle control, including through play, movement, outdoor activity and purposeful use of tools and materials (DfE, 2023). DfE guidance similarly identifies physical development as involving strength, coordination, balance and control, developed through meaningful activity and adult support where needed (DfE, 2026).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Play is important, but some movement skills need adult teaching

You may already protect time for child-initiated physical play. That remains important. Children often explore movement naturally, and play gives them opportunities to test, repeat and adapt what their bodies can do (Evangelou et al., 2009; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024).

However, the evidence also cautions that play alone may not be enough for every child to develop secure physical skills (Ofsted, 2024). Some children need adults to model movements, give encouragement, provide feedback, vary the level of challenge or teach small steps towards greater control (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024).

In practice, an adult might briefly model how to balance before stepping, stop safely on a wheeled toy, carry a crate with a partner, or throw towards a target. The adult then steps back to observe whether children can practise the movement independently or whether further support is needed (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024).

You may notice that some children return to movements they already find comfortable. This can show confidence and enjoyment, but it may also mean they have fewer opportunities to practise new or more challenging skills. Thoughtful adult interaction can widen children's movement choices without turning outdoor play into an adult-led session (EEF, 2024; Ofsted, 2024).

The evidence suggests that some children need adults to

- model movement
- give verbal and physical guidance
- provide encouragement
- vary the level of challenge

- and offer feedback so that they can practise and refine movement skills over time (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

This aligns with teachers explicitly teaching and consolidating fundamental movement skills, varying difficulty, using playful or motivating contexts, and adapting levels of support until children can master activities more independently.

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Being outside is not the same as participating physically

You may have children who are present in outdoor provision every day but who do not regularly access the full range of physical opportunities. The evidence encourages adults to interpret this carefully, rather than assuming the child is simply reluctant, not ready or not interested (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2020; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

Children's participation can be affected by the physical demand of the activity, the sensory load of the space, peer movement, adult positioning, confidence, communication, routines, prior experience or changes in access to preferred resources (EEF, 2020; EEF, 2019; DfE, 2023). A delay, difficulty or withdrawn response may or may not indicate SEND, so teachers need a more detailed understanding of the individual child and the context before deciding what support is needed (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2020).

Some children may watch before joining physical play, especially when a space feels busy, unfamiliar or unpredictable. This should not be interpreted too quickly as lack of interest. Watching may help a child understand the movement, the social rules, the pace of the activity or what will happen next.

Adults can notice whether a child joins more readily when the space is calmer, the movement has been modelled, or they have a clear role within the play (EEF, 2020; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

You may recognise this kind of variation in your own class. A child might avoid climbing in a busy space but balance confidently indoors. Another might stay near water play but willingly carry heavy resources during construction. These patterns give useful information about what helps or hinders participation (Evangelou et al., 2009; EEF, 2020; DfE, 2023).

The important point is not to lower expectations too quickly or to wait passively for children to join in. Adults can keep the opportunity open, reduce unnecessary barriers and offer the least help needed. This might mean modelling the first movement, giving a clear role, changing the level of

challenge, reducing crowding, offering a peer partner or noticing when the child is ready for the adult to step back (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Physical competence can support confidence, independence and belonging

You will know from your own practice that physical development affects more than movement. It shapes how children join play, manage self-care, use resources, take safe risks and experience themselves as capable (DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

Physical development supports emotional wellbeing, health, play, relationships, self-care and participation (DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024). The IELS report also found positive relationships between physical development and emergent literacy, emergent numeracy, mental flexibility and emotion identification, although these relationships should not be treated as simple cause and effect (Kettlewell et al., 2020; EEF, 2023).

Teachers support this through regular physical activity, purposeful movement opportunities, modelling, encouragement, feedback and adaptation to children's stages of development (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Scenario 2

Choose the evidence you wish to revisit

Use your reflections and self-diagnostic to select which evidence summaries to revisit.

Click the link to revisit the evidence base:

<u>Fine motor development begins before the pencil</u>	<u>Purposeful tool use builds control and independence</u>
<u>Adults need to notice the physical demand of the task</u>	<u>More practice is not always better unless it is the right practice</u>

Fine motor development begins before the pencil

You may notice children's fine motor development most quickly when they draw, cut, hold a pencil or form letters. The evidence invites you to look earlier and wider. Fine motor control is built on broader physical development, including core strength, posture, coordination, shoulder stability, hand strength, visual motor control and repeated opportunities to use the body with increasing control (DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

Development Matters explains that children need a wide-ranging programme of physical skills before accurate letter formation, including large-muscle coordination through activities such as climbing, swinging, messy play and parachute games, alongside small-muscle coordination through scissors, sewing, cutlery, brushes, pencils and drawing (DfE, 2023). DfE guidance also describes writing, drawing and painting as whole-body skills, supported by core strength and coordination (DfE, 2026). Ofsted highlights that learning gross motor skills helps children develop fine motor skills, because children need increasing control over their bodies and objects before they can handle small tools with confidence (Ofsted, 2024).

This evidence helps adults look beyond pencil grip alone. A child who presses hard, tires quickly or avoids mark-making may need more than another pencil task. The child may be working hard to stabilise their body, coordinate both hands, control pressure, track visually or sustain posture (DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

Careful observations can help adults understand the wider physical foundations that may be affecting mark-making, drawing, painting or early writing, including posture, coordination, strength, control and visual motor integration (DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Purposeful tool use builds control and independence

You may already provide rich opportunities for children to use tools and materials. The evidence suggests that these experiences are especially powerful when adults are clear about the physical skill children are practising (DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; EEF, 2024).

DfE guidance highlights activities such as cooking, gardening and weaving as meaningful ways to develop fine motor skills, coordination, hand strength and control, especially when adults provide feedback and support (DfE, 2026).

Development Matters gives similar examples, including threading, sewing, woodwork, pouring, stirring, planting, small world play, construction, malleable materials, cutlery, scissors, brushes and pencils (DfE, 2023). EEF guidance also emphasises modelling, feedback and opportunities to practise movement and handling skills (EEF, 2024).

Provision such as construction, clay, water play, planting and chalkboards can be more than engaging activity. These experiences can help children practise grasping, squeezing, twisting, pouring, cutting, stabilising, reaching, pushing, pulling and coordinating both hands (DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023). You may notice this when a child who avoids pencils spends sustained time rolling clay, pegging fabric, pouring water or using a small brush.

These interactions keep the physical purpose visible without turning play into a worksheet-style task. They also connect physical development with independence in eating, dressing, hygiene, tool use and self-care (DfE, 2023).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Adults need to notice the physical demand of the task

The evidence reminds us that children develop at different rates and need different types of support, so adults need to notice what a task is physically asking of the child before deciding what to change (Evangelou et al., 2009; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024).

DfE guidance encourages adults to observe what children are doing physically and consider whether provision is meeting their physical development needs (DfE, 2026). Ofsted also emphasises that practitioners need to know what children can already do, what they need to learn next and the small steps that lead towards proficiency (Ofsted, 2024). This makes adult noticing more precise than simply recording whether a child “can” or “cannot” complete an activity.

Adults might look again at children who find mark-making difficult and ask:

You may recognise how useful this can be in your own setting. A child who changes hands frequently may be exploring control but may also need more bilateral coordination. A child who presses hard may need more experience varying pressure. A child may need further support or the tools adjusted before the task is simplified (Evangelou et al., 2009; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024).

Adults can then respond with the least helpful adjustment. They might model one movement, change the tool, reduce the size of the material, offer a vertical surface, give feedback on pressure or provide more time before stepping back

(EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024). This aligns with adapting approaches to children's stage of development and adjusting support until children can master activities more independently.

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

More practice is not always better unless it is the right practice

The evidence suggests that repeated pencil-control tasks may be too narrow if children first need broader strength, coordination, posture, hand-eye control or experience using tools for a purpose (DfE, 2023; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024).

Development Matters states that children need a wide-ranging programme of physical skills development before accurate letter formation, including both large-muscle and small-muscle coordination (DfE, 2023). DfE guidance emphasises a joined-up approach to gross and fine motor development, with repeated and meaningful opportunities to explore materials, use tools and develop confidence (DfE, 2026). Ofsted also notes that children need explicit teaching and practice of the building blocks of physical skills, rather than only access to play (Ofsted, 2024). EEF guidance supports the use of modelling, feedback, varied opportunities and targeted practice (EEF, 2024).

An adult might say, "You used strong hands to squeeze the clay. Now let's try using gentle fingers to draw the small lines on your map." This connects broader physical experience to more precise control (DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; EEF, 2024).

This aligns with explicitly teaching movement skills, varying difficulty, using playful and motivating contexts, supporting fine and visual motor development, and adapting support so children can work towards independence (EEF, 2024; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Key theme 2: Participation barriers need careful interpretation before labelling

Evidence

Choose the evidence you wish to revisit

Use your reflections and self-diagnostic to select which evidence summaries to revisit.

Click the link to revisit the evidence base:

<u>Variation across contexts gives useful information</u>	<u>A delay or withdrawn response may or may not indicate SEND</u>	<u>The environment can create or reduce barriers to participation</u>
<u>Physical participation is linked to self-care, confidence and belonging</u>	<u>Support should respond to the real barrier</u>	

Variation across contexts gives useful information

The evidence reminds us that children develop at different rates and may need different types of support depending on the context, task and adult interaction (Evangelou et al., 2009; DfE, 2015; EEF, 2020; EEF, 2026).

A child may show confidence in one physical context and hesitation in another. This does not mean adults should ignore the concern. It means they should look at the pattern before deciding what it shows (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2020; EEF, 2026).

An adult might say: "I noticed you carried the crates carefully inside. Outside, the plank felt different because children were moving quickly nearby. Let's look at the first step together."

This keeps the focus on what the child can already do, what is different in this context and what support may help next (Evangelou et al., 2009; EEF, 2020; EEF, 2026).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

A delay or withdrawn response may or may not indicate SEND

The SEND Code of Practice sets out four broad areas of need, but these are a starting point rather than a full explanation of what an individual child needs (DfE, 2015).

A child's delay, difficulty or withdrawn response may or may not indicate SEND. Behaviour or avoidance may also be shaped by the activity, environment, routine, adult interaction, sensory load, communication demands or prior experience (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2020; EEF, 2019).

The evidence reminds us that a diagnosis, where one exists, does not automatically tell adults what support will be most effective. Children with the same diagnosis can have different strengths, needs and experiences, and these can change over time (EEF, 2026).

A child's response to physical activity may relate to balance, sensory load, peer movement, confidence, self-care, communication or a possible physical development need. Adults therefore need to understand the child and the context before deciding what support is most likely to help (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2020; DfE, 2023).

You may want to avoid two unhelpful responses:

1. dismissing the concern because the child manages some physical tasks well
2. labelling the concern too quickly because the child avoids some physical tasks

A more useful adult move might be: "Let's notice when this happens, what helps, and whether the same pattern appears in other physical tasks."

This supports careful identification while keeping support timely, practical and linked to what adults are learning about the child (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2020; EEF, 2026).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

The environment can create or reduce barriers to participation

You may have seen children participate differently when a space becomes crowded, noisy or fast-moving. The EEF reminds us that barriers are not only located within the child. They can also arise from the environment, the activities children are asked to join and the interactions they have with adults and peers (EEF, 2020).

This matters for physical development because children's movement depends on the conditions around them. A balance route may be manageable when quiet but feel unsafe when peers move quickly nearby. A self-care task may be possible when there is time, but harder when several children are waiting (EEF, 2020; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

The evidence cautions that adaptations can be effective or ineffective. Making a task easier, removing the challenge or adding too much adult help may not support learning if it reduces children's thinking, practice or independence (EEF, 2026). A child may need support to enter a physical activity, but this does not necessarily mean removing the physical challenge altogether.

An adult might say: "You can choose the first step. I'll stand here while you try. Then I'll move back and watch." This keeps the environment predictable and safe while supporting participation and independence (EEF, 2020; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024; EEF, 2026).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Physical participation is linked to self-care, confidence and belonging

You will know that physical development is not only about movement sessions or outdoor play. It also affects children's self-care, use of tools, independence, confidence and relationships (DfE, 2026; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024).

Development Matters links physical development to managing personal needs, personal hygiene, healthy choices and safe movement (DfE, 2023). DfE guidance also highlights the importance of supporting children who find personal care or physical play difficult, including working sensitively with parents and health professionals where needed (DfE, 2026). Ofsted notes that physical competence can support children's emotional wellbeing, play, relationships and sense of achievement (Ofsted, 2024).

A child's hesitation in physical play and variable independence with self-care routines may be connected, but adults should avoid assuming a single cause. Taken together, these moments can provide useful information about confidence, coordination, self-care and participation (DfE, 2023; DfE, 2026; Ofsted, 2024).

Positive relationships, high expectations and a sense of belonging support engagement and participation (EEF, 2026). This means adults should combine warmth and reassurance with a continued belief that the child can take part, practise and become more independent (EEF, 2026).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Support should respond to the real barrier

The evidence suggests that support is most useful when adults understand what is helping or hindering participation, then adapt support without lowering ambition unnecessarily (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2020; EEF, 2024; EEF, 2026).

The IELS report found that having an identified SEN was associated with lower fine and gross motor development, even where the need was not necessarily a physical disability. This means physical development can be an important area to monitor, but it should not lead to simplistic conclusions about SEND (Kettlewell et al., 2020; DfE, 2015; EEF, 2020).

EEF (2026) adds an important caution: more adaptations do not automatically lead to more learning. Adaptations and additional support need to be integrated with strong universal provision, linked to classroom learning and monitored carefully, because ineffective support can hinder learning (EEF, 2026).

Adults may need to gather more precise information before deciding next steps. This might include observing the child across different physical contexts, such as construction, outdoor balance play, lunch, dressing and calmer tool-use activities. It may also involve drawing on family knowledge, because children's capabilities can look different across home and school contexts (Evangelou et al., 2009; DfE, 2015; EEF, 2026).

Useful support might include:

- modelling one movement before stepping back
- offering a calmer first attempt
- adjusting the equipment without removing the challenge
- giving time to try before helping with self-care
- seeking SENCO or health advice if concerns persist

An adult might say: "I'll show you once, then you try. I'll wait before I help."

This keeps support proportionate. It helps adults notice whether the child needs modelling, more practice, a different level of challenge, environmental adjustment, family discussion or further advice (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2020; EEF, 2024; EEF, 2026).

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Chapter 2: Environment

<u>Key theme 1: Creating richer reasons to communicate in everyday routines</u>	<u>Key theme 2: Creating purposeful opportunities for movement and control</u>	<u>Key theme 3: Creating predictable environments so more children can take part</u>
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Key theme 1: Creating richer reasons to communicate in everyday routines

Scenario 1

Choose the evidence you wish to revisit

Use your reflections and self-diagnostic to select which evidence summaries to revisit.

Click the link to revisit the evidence base:

<u>Start with strong teaching for everyone</u>	<u>Understand the barrier before choosing the support</u>	<u>Use what children show you to decide what happens next</u>
<u>A smaller group should change the teaching opportunity</u>	<u>Keep support connected to learning and independence</u>	

Start with strong teaching for everyone

Adaptive teaching starts with an engaging, high-quality curriculum that gives all children meaningful opportunities to participate, practise and experience success.

You may already recognise this in your Reception practice. Children may explore the same mathematical idea while adults vary modelling, resources or prompts. During a story, one child may need more time to respond while another is ready to explain further. The intended learning remains ambitious, but support changes in response to children's understanding and development.

Small-group teaching should similarly be matched to children's current understanding and linked to classroom learning (EEF, 2019).

Some children will also need targeted teaching alongside the shared curriculum when they require additional support with a specific aspect of learning (EEF, 2026). Targeted small-group teaching can have a positive impact when it responds to an identified learning need (EEF, 2019). For example, structured teaching focused on listening, narrative and vocabulary improved spoken language outcomes for children with relatively low language skills (Sibieta et al, 2016). Small-group approaches may also be particularly valuable for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (EEF, 2023). This does not mean that disadvantage alone determines who needs additional support. Decisions should remain informed by ongoing assessment of children's individual learning needs (EEF, 2026).

Targeted support therefore sits alongside, rather than replaces, high-quality teaching for the whole class. Small-group teaching should remain connected to classroom learning (EEF, 2019; EEF 2026), and a single intervention is unlikely to address every aspect of learning or close attainment gaps on its own (EEF, 2023).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Understand the barrier before choosing the support

In everyday Reception practice, you may already notice that the same response from two children can mean different things. Formative assessment involves gathering evidence of learning and using it to inform what happens next (EEF, 2021a; Apthorp et al, 2017).

Consider a child who contributes little during a whole-class story. They may need more processing time, be unsure of the vocabulary or feel less confident speaking in a larger group. Similar responses may therefore lead to different teaching decisions. A diagnosis, identified need or broad characteristic may add useful information, but it does not automatically determine the most effective support in a particular learning moment. Adaptations should be informed by the specific task and ongoing assessment of the child's needs (EEF, 2026).

This professional judgement is central to formative assessment. Children's responses can reveal more about their thinking than whether an answer is simply correct (EEF, 2021a). Teachers interpret this alongside what they already know about the child before deciding how teaching might change (Sortwell et al, 2024).

You may already build this picture through interaction, observation and conversations with parents and carers. Assessment can draw on professional expertise and information shared by others without excessive paperwork. Children's contexts, backgrounds and prior experiences can help identify strengths and possible barriers, while information such as month of birth may add to this wider picture. This information should inform professional enquiry rather than predetermine the support a child receives (EEF, 2026).

This precision matters because small-group teaching is more likely to be effective when it responds to a specific learning need (EEF, 2019), and adaptations or additional support should be informed by ongoing assessment of children's needs (EEF, 2026). Approaches should reflect children's current development and progress (EEF, 2023).

Sometimes the next step is not more information but looking more closely at what has already been noticed. Ongoing monitoring does not necessarily require new systems or additional records (EEF, 2026).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Use what children show you to decide what happens next

You may already make small adjustments to teaching throughout the Reception day. A child rearranges five objects and recounts the whole set. Another repeats a new word but does not yet use it independently. A child manages a routine with a visual cue, then becomes unsure when the cue is removed.

These moments provide information about children's current understanding and needs. Formative assessment is most valuable when that information shapes a teaching decision. It involves gathering and interpreting evidence of learning, then using it to decide how teaching should respond (Apthorp et al, 2017; EEF, 2021a).

The response does not need to be a new activity. You might model again, change a prompt, give more time, provide further practice or reduce support. Effective adaptation may strengthen or increase the intensity of familiar teaching approaches rather than require a separate task (EEF, 2026).

Paying attention to what children's responses reveal about their thinking can be more informative than focusing only on whether they are correct or complete a task (EEF, 2021a).

Any adaptation should be specific to what the child's response has revealed, rather than being based on a broad assumption about their ability (EEF, 2026).

Formative assessment is an ongoing process of gathering, interpreting and using information so teaching can be adjusted in a timely way (Apthorp et al, 2017). Professional judgement is central to interpreting what children show and deciding how teaching should change (Sortwell et al, 2024).

An adaptation is not the end of the process. Adaptations can help or hinder learning, so notice how the child responds and use this to refine what happens next (Apthorp et al, 2017; Sortwell et al, 2024; EEF, 2026). Support may need to be increased, changed, reduced or removed as the child's needs change (EEF, 2026).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

A smaller group should change the teaching opportunity

You will already be using small-group teaching regularly. Small groups can create opportunities for closer interaction, sustained engagement and feedback matched more closely to children's understanding (EEF, 2019). The important question is what the adult can notice or do differently because the group is smaller.

In the Nuffield Early Language Intervention, structured small-group and individual teaching focused on listening, narrative and vocabulary improved children's spoken language outcomes (Sibieta et al, 2016). This reflects wider evidence that targeted teaching can positively affect outcomes when it responds to an identified need (EEF, 2019).

Not every small group is a targeted intervention. A smaller group may simply create a more responsive teaching opportunity within the Reception curriculum. Where additional support takes the form of a structured intervention, the evidence places greater emphasis on careful matching to a specific need, regular delivery and preparation for the adult delivering it (EEF, 2026).

Effective small-group teaching depends on identifying the learning need, matching teaching to children's current understanding and preparing adults for high-quality interaction and feedback (EEF, 2019). Adaptations and additional support should be task-specific, informed by ongoing assessment and adjusted as children's needs change (EEF, 2026).

You may recognise this in your own practice. The next consideration is consistency. Do all adults understand what children are working towards, what they will model or practise and what children's responses may reveal? Training, preparation and effective communication between teachers and teaching

assistants can strengthen the delivery of targeted support (EEF, 2019; EEF, 2025; EEF, 2026; Sibieta et al, 2016).

Simple shared prompts can make the purpose of everyday small-group teaching visible. A teaching assistant supporting classroom teaching does not necessarily need a detailed lesson plan, but does need clarity about the intended learning, the barrier being addressed and what children's responses may reveal (EEF, 2025). Structured interventions may require greater preparation, training and supporting resources so that their core components are delivered consistently (Sibieta et al., 2016; EEF, 2026). This supports timely, targeted teaching informed by children's strengths, contexts and possible barriers.

Where children attended Nursery, previous knowledge of their learning may help Reception adults understand what has already been taught, practised or supported. In the Nuffield study, the longer programme began in Nursery and continued into Reception and produced stronger language outcomes than the shorter Reception-only programme (Sibieta et al, 2016). The finding does not tell us which feature of the longer programme caused the difference, but it reinforces the importance of considering the intensity and progression of targeted support rather than treating a group as a one-off activity (Sibieta et al, 2016; EEF, 2026).

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Keep support connected to learning and independence

Targeted teaching should help children use developing knowledge and skills beyond the small-group or one-to-one interaction. Additional support should be considered alongside and integrated with everyday teaching, rather than becoming a separate learning experience (EEF, 2026). Small-group support is most effective when it is closely linked to classroom learning, giving children further opportunities to use what they have practised (EEF, 2019).

You may already create these connections across the Reception day. A child rehearses vocabulary with an adult, then meets the same words in a story or play. Another practises composing a number, then applies this during a counting routine. Repetition can support targeted teaching (Sibieta et al, 2016), while approaches should remain matched to children's developing knowledge and progression (EEF, 2023).

What happens next provides further information. Can the child use the word without a model, apply an idea in a new context or manage when a prompt is reduced? Children's responses can inform timely adjustments (Apthorp et al,

2017), with support refined as adults learn more about their understanding (Sortwell et al, 2024).

Adult: "Yesterday we used the word enormous when we talked about the whale."

Child: "It was really big."

Adult: "Yes. What was our word for really big?"

Child: "Enormous."

Later, during construction play, the child looks at a tall tower.

Child: "Look at my enormous tower!"

Adult: "You remembered that word."

The earlier repetition showed that the child could recall the word with a prompt. Its spontaneous use during play provides different information about how independently the child can use the learning. Monitoring children's responses in this way helps adults judge whether additional support is helping and how it may need to change (Apthorp et al, 2017; EEF, 2026).

This matters for independence. Teaching should adapt levels of support until children can master activities more independently. Effective scaffolding is temporary, informed by what a child can currently manage and gradually removed as responsibility shifts towards the child (EEF, 2025; EEF, 2026). A scaffold that was helpful yesterday may therefore need to change, reduce or be removed as the child's needs change.

Targeted support must also be sustainable. In the Nuffield Early Language Intervention, teaching assistants found it difficult to protect delivery time, and senior support was needed alongside wider responsibilities (Sibieta et al, 2016). Implementation matters because even a well-matched intervention may be difficult to deliver effectively if adults lack preparation, communication or protected opportunities for regular delivery (EEF, 2026).

Keep looking beyond the supported moment. Notice where children use learning again and whether the support is helping them think, participate and act with increasing independence. Adjust, reduce or remove support as children's needs change (2.b; EEF, 2019; EEF, 2023; EEF, 2025; EEF, 2026).

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Key theme 2: Creating purposeful opportunities for movement and control

Scenario 2

Choose the evidence you wish to revisit

Use your reflections and self-diagnostic to select which evidence summaries to revisit.

Click the link to revisit the evidence base:

<u>Protect access to shared teaching</u>	<u>Change the route in, not the ambition</u>
<u>Support without taking over</u>	<u>Keep targeted support connected to the curriculum</u>

Protect access to shared teaching

You may already adapt adult support so that children who need additional help can take part in shared learning. The first priority for children with additional or special educational needs remains strengthening the quality of classroom teaching, while recognising that some children may also need adaptations or targeted support. Universal teaching and additional support should be considered together as complementary parts of inclusive practice, rather than as separate stages (EEF, 2026). Research suggests that approaches used for children with special educational needs are often not fundamentally distinct from effective teaching for other children, although individual differences still need careful attention (Davis et al, 2004).

The evidence also invites us to look closely at children's actual experience of that teaching. Pupils with SEND can spend less time in whole-class teaching, with the teacher and alongside peers when teaching assistants take on a substantial direct instructional role (EEF, 2020). Well-intended support can therefore create greater separation if adults become a child's main route into learning (EEF, 2020).

Additional adult support can improve access to teaching, but it should not be assumed to improve learning automatically. For example, an adult sitting near a child may provide reassurance, clarify a task or support attention. However, if the adult repeats instructions too quickly or prompts before the child has had time to watch, process and attempt a response, the support may reduce

opportunities to attend to the teacher, think and learn alongside peers (EEF, 2025).

This is why well-intended adaptations should be monitored. Support can help or hinder depending on how it is used (EEF, 2026). You may already ask these questions when planning adult deployment. The key issue is whether additional support strengthens the child's access to high-quality teaching, and how it sits alongside the approaches used across the classroom (EEF, 2020; EEF, 2026).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Change the route in, not the ambition

In Reception, adults routinely vary modelling, resources and support so that children can engage with important learning in different ways. Often, effective adaptation strengthens familiar elements of high-quality teaching through additional modelling, examples, feedback or opportunities to practise (EEF, 2026). Responsive adaptation can support children who are learning at different rates (Deunk et al, 2018; EEF, 2026). The evidence does not, however, suggest that effective adaptation is defined by creating a different task for every child. Effective adaptations are more likely to be task-specific and informed by children's current needs. Creating separate or oversimplified tasks can reduce the thinking children need to do (EEF, 2026).

Grouping can provide a context for responsive teaching, but grouping alone does not guarantee that teaching is well matched to children's needs. Fixed, homogeneous ability grouping may also disadvantage lower-attaining pupils (Deunk et al, 2018). Similarly, highly individualised activities can be difficult to organise and monitor and may leave adults with less time for high-quality teaching interactions (EEF, 2021b).

Consider children retelling a familiar story. One child uses picture prompts while the adult models how to sequence the events.

Adult: "What happened first?"

Child: "The bear went into the cave."

Nearby, another child retells the same story without prompts and explains why the character acted as they did.

The route into the learning is different, but the important learning remains ambitious and shared. The picture prompts and modelling provide task-specific support for sequencing. They do not remove the child's responsibility to recall and communicate the events of the story. This protects the child's thinking

while increasing access to the intended learning (EEF, 2026). Adaptive teaching is less valuable when it artificially creates distinct tasks or lowers expectations for particular children (Deunk et al, 2018; EEF, 2026).

This may confirm choices already embedded in your practice. The challenge is whether those choices remain intentional and flexible across adults and classrooms. Flexible groups should respond to children's current learning and be reviewed as children progress. Adaptations should be proportionate, timely and changed or removed when they are no longer required (EEF, 2026). A child who needs more modelling today should not automatically remain on a separate pathway tomorrow.

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Support without taking over

Across a Reception day, adults constantly judge when to step in and when to give a child more time. That judgement matters because adult support can help children engage with learning, but over-prompting or prioritising task completion can reduce children's opportunities to think and foster dependence (EEF, 2025; EEF, 2026). Well-intended support therefore needs to be judged by whether it is helping rather than hindering learning (EEF, 2026).

The principle of scaffolding is to provide temporary, task-specific support informed by what a child can currently manage, helping them proceed with increasing independence (EEF, 2025; EEF, 2026). EEF guidance recommends giving the least support first: allowing time to think and try, then moving from a prompt or clue towards modelling or more direct correction only when needed (EEF, 2025).

Effective scaffolding provides the right amount of task-specific help at the right time, then reduces that support as the child becomes more able to proceed independently (EEF, 2025; EEF, 2026).

A shared principle such as "Give children time to try. Add the least help needed" can help adults respond coherently without requiring identical scripts. Shared understanding of the core principles of support can help staff make context-sensitive decisions more consistently (EEF, 2026). This matters because teaching assistants should supplement, rather than replace, high-quality teaching, and poorly considered deployment can increase children's dependence on adult support or reduce access to the teacher and peers (EEF, 2020; EEF, 2025).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Keep targeted support connected to the curriculum

Targeted support can be an important part of inclusive Reception practice, particularly when children need increased or more specialised help with language and communication. Interventions are most effective as additional support that supplements and is integrated with high-quality everyday teaching, rather than replacing it (EEF, 2026). The question is whether that support remains closely connected to the teaching and learning children experience across the rest of the day.

EEF guidance cautions that children can miss classroom teaching, subjects they enjoy and opportunities to learn alongside peers when they are withdrawn for interventions. It also stresses that children should not be expected to make the links between intervention content and classroom learning for themselves (EEF, 2020).

This places a responsibility on adults to consider the whole learning experience. A targeted language session might include explicit vocabulary teaching, visual support, modelling and repeated oral rehearsal led by a skilled practitioner. Structured language teaching has improved spoken language outcomes when support is focused on identified needs and delivered by trained adults (Sibieta et al, 2016). Its place in the timetable is only part of the decision. Adults also need shared clarity about the learning focus and how it connects to the Reception curriculum. Effective communication between the class teacher and the practitioner delivering support helps keep intervention learning connected to classroom content (EEF, 2019; EEF, 2020; EEF, 2026).

Targeted interventions should be timely, closely aligned with the curriculum, minimise time away from the classroom, include clear measures of success and be regularly reviewed. Not every intervention is effective, so additional support should not be assumed to help simply because it is structured or targeted (EEF, 2026). Adults need to check that the intervention is matched to a specific barrier, can be delivered consistently by a trained practitioner and is worth what the child may miss while taking part (EEF, 2020; EEF, 2026).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Key theme 3: Creating predictable environments so more children can take part

Evidence

Choose the evidence you wish to revisit

Use your reflections and self-diagnostic to select which evidence summaries to revisit.

Click the link to revisit the evidence base:

[Reducing the environmental load supports all children](#)

[Working in partnership with families to build a picture](#)

Reducing the environmental load supports all children

Attention should be given to how children experience their classroom environment to support their executive function. Pupils with cognition and learning needs can find classroom environments overwhelming when there is a high level of sensory information or competing demands on attention and processing (Carroll et al., 2017). Reducing unnecessary cognitive and sensory load can support learning and participation. (Antalek et al., 2025).

Research found that children and young people with SEND exposed to classroom babble combined with environmental noise performed significantly worse than their peers on speed-of-processing tasks than those working in quieter conditions (Dockrell and Shield, 2006 cited by Antalek et al., 2025). However, children with typical development also found it harder to perform tasks in these conditions (Carroll et al., 2017).

What's more, the same study also found that the effects for all groups were reduced when there was a break in the background noise. This suggests that children were able to re-set and focus where there was no time limit set for the task (Carroll et al., 2017).

Creating calmer learning environments by minimising background noise and reducing unnecessary sensory distractions may help pupils with cognition and learning needs access learning more effectively. This might include using dimmed lighting, limiting the number of steps in a transition routine or considering how to reduce the impact of any background noise, for example by playing classical music.

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Working in partnership with families to build a picture

Families and parents are best placed to provide important background details that can help schools to support children when additional needs are first being identified (Carroll et al., 2017; EEF, 2020). This is also a key recommendation in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) and fundamental to the Graduated Approach cycle. However, the school and its leaders should invest time and care to create the conditions whereby all parents feel safe and comfortable to advocate for their child.

The EEF points to research that indicates that some parents may have negative experiences from previous interactions with school (EEF, 2020). This may present more challenge in some instances, particularly when working in Early Years settings where families may be new to the school and relationships have not yet been established. Looking through the lens of the family, they may be unfamiliar with the school and its approaches (EEF, 2020) Therefore time should be taken to put strategies and approaches in place to engage families and build a positive two-way relationship (EEF, 2020).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

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Chapter 3: Curriculum Design

<u>Key theme 1: Clear curriculum intentions support purposeful teaching</u>	<u>Key theme 2: Assessment should reveal the intended literacy learning</u>
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Key theme 1: Clear curriculum intentions support purposeful teaching

Scenario 1

Choose the evidence you wish to revisit

Use your reflections and self-diagnostic to select which evidence summaries to revisit.

Click the link to revisit the evidence base:

<u>Start with what you want children to learn</u>	<u>Keep the curriculum broad and connected</u>	<u>Use child development to interpret what children need</u>
<u>Vary support without unnecessarily fragmenting the curriculum</u>	<u>Plan language throughout the curriculum</u>	

Start with what you want children to learn

A curriculum is your plan for what children should experience, learn and become able to do. It should be holistic, ambitious and grounded in all seven areas of learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2023; DfE, 2024).

Curriculum planning begins with intended learning, rather than with an activity. Activities, teaching, play and experiences are selected because they help children build the knowledge, language and skills identified in the curriculum (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022a).

You may already recognise the difference between asking:

- What will the children do?

and:

- What do I want the children to understand, remember or become more able to do?

Both questions matter, but the second gives the activity its purpose. When planning begins only with what children will do, a curriculum can become a list of engaging experiences without enough clarity about what all children should learn (Ofsted, 2024).

For example, children might plant seeds, water them and observe what happens. The intended Reception learning could be that plants need water, light and suitable conditions to grow. Planting provides a meaningful context through which children can build and revisit this knowledge. It is not the curriculum intention by itself (DfE, 2023; DfE, 2024).

Research and guidance caution that a Reception curriculum can become a list of interesting activities when the intended learning is unclear. Children may be engaged and busy without necessarily encountering the knowledge, language or skills they need (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2024).

Progression also involves more than moving quickly to new content. Children make progress when they know more, remember more and can do more of what the curriculum intended. They may need several encounters with an idea before they can use it confidently and independently. Depth is usually more valuable than superficial coverage (DfE, 2023; DfE, 2024).

This may reflect choices you already make when you:

- revisit a story so children understand it more deeply
- return to a mathematical idea in different contexts
- delay complex recording until foundational understanding is secure
- provide time to apply taught knowledge through play

Ofsted's earlier review of Reception practice found that successful schools used a considered balance of direct teaching, small-group work, partner learning and play. Adults understood the contribution each approach made to children's learning (Ofsted, 2017).

Professional expertise is important in making these choices. Research has linked trained teacher involvement, curriculum leadership and responsive teaching with higher-quality provision and stronger intellectual and social outcomes (Sylva et al, 2003). This reflects the importance of teachers' knowledge of child development in determining the quality of early education.

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Keep the curriculum broad and connected

Clear intentions do not mean dividing the curriculum into isolated subjects or treating each experience as having only one possible benefit. The areas of learning are interconnected, and the specific areas provide contexts in which children can strengthen communication, physical development and personal, social and emotional development (Ofsted, 2022b; DfE, 2024).

A planting sequence might have a principal intention connected with understanding the world. Because the areas of learning are interconnected, the same experience may also provide purposeful opportunities to strengthen communication, physical development and personal, social and emotional development (Ofsted, 2022b; DfE, 2024).

Within it, adults may:

- model how children can negotiate roles and respond when plans change, then notice how this affects social interaction and engagement (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2022b)
- support children to ask for help, describe discomfort or explain a physical need, drawing on the secure relationships and communication that enable children to express themselves (Ofsted, 2022b)
- explicitly teach safe and controlled ways to carry, pour or use gardening tools, rather than assuming that participation alone will develop these skills (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2022b)
- provide purposeful fine and visual motor experiences through handling seeds, using tools and observational drawing, alongside modelling and feedback (Ofsted, 2022b)
- create varied opportunities for digging, transporting and whole-body movement outdoors, with support adapted to children's confidence and physical development (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2022b)

These connections should be intentional where they strengthen the curriculum. They should not become a checklist suggesting that every activity develops every area of learning. Adults still need to identify the principal learning, then decide which related opportunities add genuine value without obscuring the knowledge or skill being developed (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022b).

For example, a gardening experience may support communication, physical development and collaboration, while the principal curriculum intention remains for children to understand what plants need to grow. Clear intentions help adults recognise worthwhile connections without losing sight of the learning being built.

This is particularly important for equity. High-quality early education can help prevent differences in children's previous opportunities from becoming lasting limits on what they learn (Marmot et al., 2010). A broad curriculum should therefore extend children's knowledge and interests, including beyond experiences that are already familiar or readily available to them.

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Use child development to interpret what children need

Your knowledge of child development helps you interpret what children show you through their language, actions, play, attention and responses.

Children do not all progress through a fixed sequence at the same pace. Development is better understood as a web of interconnected strands. Progress in language, physical development, emotional security, relationships and thinking can influence development elsewhere (Evangelou et al, 2009; DfE, 2023).

You may notice that a child:

- demonstrates an idea practically before explaining it in words
- communicates confidently in familiar play but not in a larger group
- remembers vocabulary from a story but needs support to use it elsewhere
- watches other children before joining an unfamiliar experience

Children may demonstrate knowledge, communication and participation differently across contexts because development follows varied and interconnected pathways (Evangelou et al., 2009). What children say, do and choose during teaching and play can therefore provide useful information about their starting points and current understanding (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2022b).

These observations do not necessarily mean that a child needs a different curriculum goal. They can help adults decide whether the child needs a different experience, more modelling, repeated language, additional time or another form of support to access the intended learning (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022b).

This reflects the principle that children develop and learn at different rates and may require different levels and types of support to succeed. Developmentally appropriate support should be adapted to help children make progress towards independence and mastery.

For example, one child may use confident subject-specific vocabulary, while another notices and describes visible differences without yet explaining why they occur. These responses may reflect different prior experiences and developmental pathways. The important question is not simply who can give the expected answer, but what each child understands and what teaching, language or experience may help them build the intended learning (Evangelou et al., 2009; Ofsted, 2022a).

Typical developmental pathways remain useful, but they are not fixed timetables. They can help you notice patterns and possible barriers without limiting what you expect a child to learn (Evangelou et al., 2009; DfE, 2023).

The quality of these judgements matters. Higher-quality settings combine warm, responsive interactions with purposeful teaching and strong professional knowledge (Sylva et al, 2003). Your knowledge of the individual child works alongside your wider understanding of development (Ofsted, 2022b).

High-quality early education is especially important because disadvantage can begin early and accumulate over time. An ambitious and inclusive curriculum can help prevent children's previous opportunities from determining the limits of their future learning (Marmot et al., 2010).

This does not mean assuming that some families provide more valuable experiences than others. Every child brings knowledge, language, culture and experience. You need to value what children bring, avoid assumptions and identify any prior knowledge they may need to access new learning (Ofsted, 2022a; DfE, 2024).

These decisions reflect both the importance of child-development knowledge (Sylva et al., 2003; Ofsted, 2022b) and the recognition that children develop at different rates and require different levels and types of support (Evangelou et al., 2009; DfE, 2023). You put this into practice when you adapt developmentally appropriate approaches consistently, while helping children progress towards independence and mastery (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022b).

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Vary support without unnecessarily fragmenting the curriculum

You will already adapt teaching in many small ways. You might repeat an explanation, change a resource, simplify an instruction, model an action or give a child longer to respond. These decisions respond to children's different starting points and help you adjust teaching when they are not yet securing the intended learning (DfE, 2024).

These adjustments allow children to work towards shared, ambitious curriculum intentions without assuming that every child needs the same quantity or type of teaching (EEF, 2026).

Inclusive teaching brings together two overlapping elements:

1. strong everyday approaches that benefit all children and may be especially important for those with additional needs

2. adaptations or additional support that some children may also require

These should be considered together, rather than as separate stages. Strengthening universal provision can reduce, although not remove, the need for additional support. Where adaptations are needed, they should remain connected to the shared curriculum and everyday teaching (EEF, 2026).

For example, Reception children might share the intention of comparing how plants have grown. You could vary the support:

- one child handles and closely observes the plants before describing them
- another uses the prompt, "This plant is different because..."
- another explains a connection with light or water independently
- a small group revisits the vocabulary with an adult later

This combines adaptation with deliberate opportunities to hear, practise and use language connected to the intended learning (EEF, 2018; EEF, 2023a; EEF, 2026).

The aim is not to make the learning less ambitious. It is to remove a barrier while retaining the important knowledge.

You may use different combinations of pedagogy according to what children know.

- "Watch how I compare these plants. First, I am looking at the stems."

This brief explanation makes the thinking visible.

- "What is different about these two stems?"

Guided practice helps children apply the comparison themselves. The balance of explanation, modelling and practice can be adapted to children's current understanding while supporting increasing independence (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022a).

Later, children might draw, discuss or care for the plants during their own exploration. This gives them an opportunity to revisit and use the learning with greater independence.

Play and explicit teaching serve complementary purposes. Play supports communication, movement, self-regulation, collaboration and problem-solving. Explicit teaching can draw children's attention to knowledge or a skill they may not discover independently. Guided play can provide structure while preserving children's agency and decisions (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2022b).

Children's development along varied and interconnected pathways means that the support needed may change across contexts and over time (Evangelou et

al., 2009; DfE, 2023). A child who needs adult modelling when knowledge is introduced may later apply it independently through play.

Adaptations can help or hinder learning. Oversimplifying a task may reduce the thinking children need to do, while organising too many separate activities may weaken universal provision and reduce opportunities for high-quality interaction (EEF, 2021a; EEF, 2026). More adaptations do not necessarily produce more learning.

High-quality interactions are central, but warm interaction alone does not guarantee that every child will learn what they need. Adults also need professional knowledge, clarity about the curriculum and an understanding of children's starting points so they can identify who may need more targeted time or attention (Sylva et al., 2003; Ofsted, 2022b; 1.1).

Current guidance asks you to adapt the activity, teaching or balance of adult-led, adult-guided and child-led learning when children are not securing the intended learning (DfE, 2024). Targeted support or intervention should supplement, rather than replace, effective everyday teaching and should remain linked to classroom learning (EEF, 2026). This reflects the considered balance of teaching and play identified in earlier Reception research (Ofsted, 2017).

Children may therefore receive different quantities and types of support while working towards shared learning. Adapting support in a developmentally appropriate way should help children progress towards independence and mastery, rather than increasing reliance on separate adult-led tasks (EEF, 2021a; EEF, 2026).

You also need to notice whether the adaptation is helping. A diagnosis, label or assumption about a child's background does not determine which support will be effective. Ongoing assessment, evidence-informed decision-making and discussion with colleagues help you decide whether to retain, refine or remove an adjustment (EEF, 2026; DfE, 2024).

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Plan language throughout the curriculum

You may already create many opportunities for conversation, stories, songs, rhymes and imaginative play. The evidence invites you to consider how clearly these opportunities support the language and knowledge you want children to build.

Language helps children communicate, think, develop knowledge, understand stories and begin to read and write. Expressive language also supports composition because children need to formulate and rehearse ideas before communicating them in writing (EEF, 2018).

Communication and language approaches can have a substantial positive impact on spoken language, vocabulary and early reading. The Education Endowment Foundation reports an average impact of seven months' additional progress, although this covers varied approaches and contexts (EEF, 2023a).

No single approach is likely to be sufficient. High-quality provision may combine:

- explicit vocabulary and sentence modelling
- interactive reading and storytelling
- collaborative and sustained conversation
- songs, rhymes and poems
- support for verbal and non-verbal communication

These approaches are most effective when skilled adults select them according to children's starting points and the intended learning (Sylva et al., 2003; EEF, 2023a; Ofsted, 2022b; 1.1).

The quality of interaction matters more than simply increasing the amount of adult talk. Children need time to listen, process, respond and develop their ideas (Ofsted, 2022b).

For example, a child may repeat newly introduced vocabulary without yet understanding or applying the underlying concept. Hearing a word is not the same as understanding its meaning or using it accurately within the intended learning (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2024).

An adult might say:

"You noticed that the soil is dry. Tell me what you think the plant might need."

After allowing time for the child to respond, the adult could extend the language:

"Yes, it needs water. The roots take in water from the soil."

Purposeful interaction, vocabulary modelling and opportunities to explain can strengthen spoken language, conceptual understanding and early literacy (EEF, 2018; EEF, 2023a; Ofsted, 2022a).

Interactive reading is also valuable when adults encourage children to predict, explain, recall and discuss. Repeated reading helps children move from

recognising a story's language to using its vocabulary and ideas in wider contexts (EEF, 2018; EEF, 2023a; Ofsted, 2017).

Language should therefore be planned throughout the curriculum, rather than added through a separate vocabulary activity. Current guidance places early language at the heart of a broad curriculum and emphasises deliberate opportunities to introduce, practise and revisit language in every area of learning (DfE, 2023; DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022b; Ofsted, 2024).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Scenario 2

Choose the evidence you wish to revisit

Use your reflections and self-diagnostic to select which evidence summaries to revisit.

Click the link to revisit the evidence base:

<u>Notice how expectations shape challenge and opportunity</u>	<u>Make disadvantage visible in curriculum planning</u>	<u>Use assessment to identify the precise curriculum need</u>
<u>Secure important foundations before adding complexity</u>	<u>Use different forms of teaching to deepen the same concept</u>	<u>Plan for meaningful experiences of success</u>

Notice how expectations shape challenge and opportunity

Earlier, you considered how a broad and connected curriculum can establish what all Reception children should learn. This section asks a different question: Within that shared curriculum, does every child receive sufficient challenge, attention and opportunity to demonstrate understanding?

You will already form working expectations about children's understanding, participation and support needs. These judgements draw on what children say and do during teaching, play and routines, alongside your knowledge of their starting points and circumstances (DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2022a).

They should remain provisional. Children may demonstrate knowledge differently across contexts, so curriculum planning, teaching and assessment need to respond to what they show (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2024; DfE, 2024).

Teacher expectations can sometimes influence outcomes through self-fulfilling effects. These effects are generally small, may reduce over time and often occur partly because expectations are accurate. More substantial effects may occur for children affected by stigma or persistently lower social expectations (Jussim et al, 2005).

The implication is not simply to “expect more”. An initial judgement may influence the opportunity offered next. Early years teaching includes questioning, explaining, setting challenges and using assessment to plan further learning (Ofsted, 2022a). You might therefore notice:

- who receives the most demanding questions
- how long children are given to think
- whose explanations are extended
- whether difficulty prompts further teaching or reduced challenge
- whether unexpected success changes an earlier view

Children with less prior knowledge may be least likely to access learning when the intended knowledge and route into it are unclear (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2024). Expectations may compound this if quieter participation or unfamiliarity is interpreted as limited capability (Jussim et al., 2005).

For example, adults may direct the most challenging questions towards children who answer quickly, while overlooking a child who demonstrates secure understanding in another context but contributes less during whole-class teaching.

An adult might say:

“You knew there were four without counting. Take some time to think. What did you notice?”

This gives the child access to the challenge of explaining their thinking and provides further evidence about what they understand (Ofsted, 2022a; DfE, 2024).

Expectations may also shape what happens when participation is difficult. Behaviour interventions can improve engagement when high expectations are maintained and support remains connected to learning (EEF, 2025a). Social and emotional learning may strengthen interaction, self-management and engagement when embedded within routine practice (EEF, 2025b).

The curriculum question is whether support preserves the intended learning and level of thinking (EEF, 2025a; EEF, 2025b).

Depending on assessment, you might retain the question while providing objects, allow more processing time, model how to contribute or help the child return after difficulty. These approaches maintain ambitious shared intentions while responding to current understanding (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022a).

Repeatedly offering less demanding content could restrict challenge and curriculum access (Jussim et al, 2005; Ofsted, 2024).

A high-quality curriculum therefore combines ambitious shared goals with ongoing enquiry into whether every child receives appropriate challenge and sufficient opportunity to make understanding visible (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2024; DfE, 2024).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Make disadvantage visible in curriculum planning

You may teach a Reception cohort in which only one or two children are identified as disadvantaged. In a small class, published figures may be unavailable and annual patterns may be difficult to see. That can make disadvantage less visible, but it does not make its effects less important.

In 2023, the estimated attainment gap between disadvantaged Reception children and their peers was 4.6 months, compared with 4.2 months in 2019. The gap remained after measurable pupil, school and regional characteristics were considered (Hunt et al, 2025). Earlier analysis estimated that around 40 per cent of the disadvantage gap visible at age 16 was already present by age five (Hutchinson et al, 2016). High-quality early education therefore has an important role in preventing early differences from becoming lasting limits on learning (Marmot et al., 2010).

This is distinct from designing a broad curriculum for everyone. The curriculum-design question here is whether children who may have had different prior opportunities receive enough access, teaching and time to secure its most important content.

A disadvantage label cannot tell you what an individual child knows or needs. Children eligible for pupil premium do not share identical experiences, strengths or barriers. Similarly, a diagnosis, status or broad category does not determine which support will be effective. Decisions should be informed by

ongoing assessment of the child's current understanding and by monitoring whether any adaptation is helping (EEF, 2026).

Curriculum planning should therefore avoid assuming that:

- unfamiliarity indicates limited capability
- disadvantaged children need simpler content
- eligibility for funding identifies a particular learning gap
- confident participation means no additional support is needed
- additional or more intensive support will necessarily produce more learning

For example, a child may continue to attend a counting group because of an earlier assessment or their eligibility for additional funding, even though they now complete the activities quickly and apply the same mathematical understanding confidently in everyday routines.

This should prompt adults to review whether the provision still addresses a current, identified need rather than allowing eligibility or an earlier judgement to determine what the child receives (EEF, 2026).

The key questions are:

What does the child understand now, what barrier remains and what curriculum experience would help them progress?

Any additional support should remain connected to the shared curriculum and be retained, adapted or removed according to its impact on the child's learning, participation and independence (EEF, 2026).

Schools with very small proportions of disadvantaged pupils have not always narrowed later progress gaps as successfully as schools where disadvantage is more visible (Hutchinson et al, 2016). This suggests that teachers and leaders should examine how curriculum opportunity is distributed, even when only a few children are affected.

You might consider:

- who receives the richest explanations, vocabulary and feedback
- whose prior knowledge is checked before new learning begins
- who receives additional practice without missing wider provision
- whether pupil premium time addresses an identified curriculum barrier

An ambitious, holistic curriculum should remain responsive to children's actual starting points and circumstances (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022a). Proportionate assessment can identify specific capabilities or difficulties rather than allowing disadvantage to become a proxy for need.

The aim is not to create a separate curriculum for disadvantaged children. It is to protect a shared entitlement while ensuring that differences in prior opportunity are met with timely teaching, experience and support (Ofsted, 2024).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Use assessment to identify the precise curriculum need

You will have experienced occasions when a child's response does not fit neatly with the group they are in.

- A child may appear uncertain during whole-class teaching but show secure understanding in play.
- Another may complete a familiar task successfully without understanding the concept beneath it.

Effective diagnostic assessment is a core feature of mastery approaches and targeted small-group teaching because it helps teachers identify what is secure and select the curriculum content that needs strengthening (EEF, 2021b; EEF, 2019).

This matters particularly in early mathematics. Children may recite a counting sequence or complete a familiar activity without understanding quantity, cardinality or the mathematical relationship involved. Regular teaching of specific mathematical concepts should therefore be informed by what children already know and the next step in their development (EEF, 2023c; EEF, 2025d).

Monitoring early literacy is similarly important because letter knowledge, phonics, narrative, comprehension and composition are related but distinct areas of learning (EEF, 2023b).

In Reception, a holistic picture may draw on:

- children's explanations, questions and errors
- what they do during intentional and guided teaching
- how they apply learning in play and routines
- a short, targeted observation of one capability
- relevant information shared by parents and carers

Children may demonstrate knowledge differently across contexts, so one response should begin enquiry rather than become a fixed judgement (DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2022a). Professional expertise, interaction and family knowledge are valid forms of assessment and should not require excessive paperwork or prolonged breaks from child interaction.

A brief note might say: "Counts five reliably in a line. Loses track when objects are scattered. Revisit organising and moving objects while counting."

Its value lies in the curriculum decision it informs, not in the amount recorded. Assessment should identify specific capabilities and difficulties, inform further practice and show whether targeted support is required (DfE, 2024).

It may lead you to adjust the content, representation, explanation, practice or level of challenge rather than automatically changing the curriculum goal (Ofsted, 2022b; DfE, 2024).

The key question is: What does this response tell me about the learning that is secure, the barrier that remains and the next curriculum experience this child needs?

Used this way, assessment is a feedback loop between intended learning, children's responses and subsequent teaching. It should refine curriculum decisions, not confirm permanent groups or generate records that do not change practice (Ofsted, 2022a).

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Secure important foundations before adding complexity

In your setting you will likely have had conversations about how curriculum progression is not simply movement towards harder content. It depends on whether children have secured the concepts on which later learning relies (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2024). Mastery learning keeps outcomes consistent while varying time and support. You may be aware that affects are more positive when content is sequenced, progress is monitored and additional teaching is provided before gaps widen, although impact varies and the evidence remains limited (EEF, 2021b).

Early mathematics evidence also emphasises building on what children know, protecting regular time for specific concepts and addressing the breadth of mathematics rather than treating maths as supplementary (EEF, 2023c; EEF, 2025d).

A mathematics programme influenced by Singaporean approaches produced a small positive effect in English primary and secondary schools. Its features included:

- fewer topics studied in greater depth
- shared curriculum content
- problem-solving

- professional development for teachers (Jerrim et al, 2016)

For Reception, this means identifying the foundational concept, planning how it develops and noticing whether children can use it flexibly. Within quantities to five, consider whether children can:

- recognise small quantities without counting
- count each object once and understand that the final number tells how many
- know that rearranging objects does not change the quantity
- compose a number from smaller numbers
- apply this understanding in a new context

Reciting numbers beyond ten does not necessarily show that a child is ready to move beyond quantities within five. A child may remember the counting sequence while still finding it difficult to coordinate one number word with each object or understand how many objects are in the set (DfE, 2024; EEF, 2021b).

The curriculum response should provide depth, not only repetition. Children might count differently arranged objects, explain why a quantity is unchanged, compose five in several ways or predict what happens when one is added or removed.

These experiences deepen the same foundation through reasoning and application. Regular mathematical teaching should prioritise secure number understanding and spatial reasoning rather than rapid coverage (EEF, 2023c; EEF, 2025d). Mastering foundational concepts before moving on is likely to support later success.

Planning should provide enough time, teaching, representation and practice for children to experience success while keeping learning ambitious (EEF, 2021b).

This is about sequencing and pacing: identifying what later learning depends on, checking whether it is secure and deciding whether greater depth, different teaching or support is needed before complexity is added (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022a).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Use different forms of teaching to deepen the same concept

You will already move between explanation, modelling, guided activity, routines and play during a Reception day. The curriculum question is not which single form of teaching is best. It is what each contributes to the intended learning.

Mastery approaches are often associated with direct instruction, but some successful studies also included collaborative learning (EEF, 2021b). One mathematics programme combined shared curriculum content with problem-solving and professional development, producing a small positive effect on attainment (Jerrim et al, 2016).

For an early number concept, the sequence might include:

Adult led teaching: "I can see four without counting because I recognise two here and two here."

The adult introduces a representation and makes the mathematical thinking visible.

Adult-initiated experience: "Can you arrange four in a different way? How do you know there are still four?"

Children apply the idea while the adult notices strategies, probes understanding and offers feedback.

Child-initiated play: A child prepares four plates in the home corner, notices one is missing and adjusts the arrangement as friends join.

These experiences are connected by a shared mathematical intention. Play is not expected to introduce every concept independently, and intentional teaching does not remove children's opportunities to explore, make decisions and use knowledge for their own purposes (Ofsted, 2022a; Ofsted, 2022b).

A high-quality Reception curriculum balances child-initiated play, adult-initiated experiences and adult led intentional teaching to support progression in knowledge, skills and dispositions for learning.

For mathematics, this means protecting regular time for developing specific knowledge, including deep understanding of number and spatial reasoning. Children also need high-quality mathematical opportunities through the environment, play and interactions with adults and peers. Spatial reasoning should be explicitly taught and then embedded meaningfully through routines and provision, rather than treated as an occasional shape activity (DfE, 2024).

Key questions that you may already ask include: Where is this concept introduced clearly, where do children practise it with guidance, and where can they use it independently? This orchestration is part of curriculum design. It helps ensure that play, routines and adult teaching do not become disconnected experiences, but work together to deepen important learning (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022a)

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Plan for meaningful experiences of success

You will likely have experienced how children's confidence can sometimes appear strongest when learning feels easy. Yet self-efficacy is not simply feeling positive. It is the belief that your actions and developing capabilities can help you succeed with a particular challenge (Kleppang et al, 2023).

A study of adolescents found that mastery experiences, defined as personal experiences of success, were more strongly associated with self-efficacy than the other factors examined. Feeling able to master something and make a useful contribution showed particularly strong associations (Kleppang et al, 2023). The study involved 13 to 16-year-olds and was cross-sectional, so its relevance to Reception is indirect and it cannot establish cause and effect. It nevertheless prompts a useful curriculum-design question:

Does the sequence help children recognise that their growing knowledge enabled them to meet a worthwhile challenge?

For example, after a child works out how many cups are needed at snack time, an adult might say:

- "You counted each place once and checked the total. That helped you know there were enough.
- This is more precise than: "You're so clever at maths."

The first response draws attention to the knowledge and strategy that supported success. It may help the child recognise what they can use again. Meaningful success requires an appropriate level of challenge.

- If an activity is too easy, children may complete it without extending their understanding.
- If it relies on insecure prior knowledge, repeated difficulty may limit participation.

Mastery approaches therefore emphasise careful sequencing, monitoring and additional support so that children can secure important learning before complexity increases (EEF, 2021b).

Curriculum design can create mastery experiences when children:

- build from secure prior learning
- have enough time to think and practise
- receive support that can gradually be reduced
- apply knowledge in more than one context
- contribute a strategy or explanation to shared learning

Social interaction may also strengthen engagement. Social and emotional learning approaches show positive average effects on relationships, attitudes to

learning and academic outcomes, with particular promise for approaches that improve interaction between pupils (EEF, 2025b).

Current guidance similarly describes progression as children knowing, remembering and doing more, rather than simply encountering harder content (DfE, 2024). Securing foundations before adding complexity may therefore support self-efficacy, but this should remain a cautious, evidence-informed proposition rather than a guaranteed outcome for every child (Kleppang et al, 2023).

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Key theme 2: Assessment should reveal the intended literacy learning

Evidence

Choose the evidence you wish to revisit

Use your reflections and self-diagnostic to select which evidence summaries to revisit.

Click the link to revisit the evidence base:

<u>Be clear what a response is evidence of</u>	<u>Use formative assessment to change what happens next</u>
<u>Keep word reading and language comprehension visible</u>	<u>Teach both elements deliberately and connect them</u>

Be clear what a response is evidence of

You will already have seen children give different responses to the same learning in different contexts. A child may explain an idea confidently during play but remain silent in a group or read a sentence accurately without showing that they understand it.

Assessment is necessary because what children learn cannot be assumed from what they have been taught. However, an observed response is not a direct measure of understanding. Adults interpret the response and infer what knowledge or capability it represents (Wiliam, 2010).

Effective assessment therefore begins with the planned curriculum: What exactly am I trying to find out?

For example, an adult may want to assess whether a child understands how events in a story connect. A whole-class verbal question may also require the child to:

- process spoken language quickly
- formulate a verbal response
- communicate in front of a group
- use the response format expected by the adult

If the child does not answer, adults cannot assume that they have not understood the story. The task may be revealing spoken expression, confidence or processing demands more clearly than comprehension itself (Wiliam, 2010).

Adults could retain the same comprehension intention while offering other ways to respond. Mina might sequence pictures, select an image, use her

communication board or act out what happened. These approaches do not reduce the intended learning. They help the team gather more valid evidence of it (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2026).

You might ask:

- What knowledge or capability is the focus?
- What other demands does the task create?
- Could success conceal a misunderstanding?
- Could an absent or incorrect response reflect another barrier?
- What additional evidence would test my interpretation?

Using interaction, targeted observation and information from parents and carers can provide a more holistic picture of what a child understands. Assessment should inform professional judgement without requiring excessive paperwork or physical evidence.

Clear curriculum intentions help adults distinguish the intended learning from the particular activity used to reveal it. This allows assessment to provide useful information about children's understanding and needs, rather than attaching too much meaning to one response in one context (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2022a).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Use formative assessment to change what happens next

You will already adjust teaching in response to children. You may repeat an explanation, change a question, offer another example or allow more time to think. These decisions become formative assessment when they are informed by children's responses and linked clearly to the planned curriculum (EEF, 2021c).

The evidence suggests that formative assessment can have positive effects on learning, ranging from trivial to large. Effects vary according to the approach and context, and the certainty of much of the evidence is low or very low (Sortwell et al., 2024). The findings are encouraging, but they do not identify one universally effective strategy.

A useful formative-assessment cycle is to:

- clarify the intended learning
- gather evidence during teaching
- interpret what the response may show
- adjust teaching or support

- notice whether the child uses the adjustment

This cycle reflects the importance of interpreting children's responses in relation to the intended learning and using the resulting information to move learning forward (Wiliam, 2010; EEF, 2021c; Sortwell et al., 2024).

For example, a child may read a sentence accurately but repeat part of it when asked to explain a character's action. The adult might respond:

"You read that the nest was empty. Let's look at the picture and the sentence together. What might the bird be hoping to find?"

This response builds from what the child has already shown, focuses feedback on the specific comprehension gap and gives the child an immediate opportunity to use the support (EEF, 2021c; Wiliam, 2010).

This feedback addresses comprehension rather than praising decoding again.

Effective feedback should focus on the particular learning gap and move learning forward. General comments about the child, such as "You are a brilliant reader", provide less information about what has been understood or what should happen next (EEF, 2021c).

Children also need an opportunity to use feedback. The loop is not complete when the adult has explained again. Ms Patel needs to notice whether Jacob can connect another event, justify a prediction or apply the thinking later in the story (EEF, 2021c; DfE, 2024).

In Reception, formative assessment will often be:

- verbal rather than written
- embedded in teaching and play
- based on interaction and observation
- followed by an immediate or later adjustment
- recorded only when a brief note will inform future practice

This reflects the use of proportionate assessment to identify capabilities and difficulties and inform further teaching.

Formative assessment is therefore not an additional activity after curriculum planning. It is the responsive process through which you test whether children are learning what the curriculum intended and decide how its delivery should change (Sortwell et al, 2024; Ofsted, 2024).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Keep word reading and language comprehension visible

Earlier, you considered how language should be developed across the curriculum. As part of this you will likely know that reading comprises two related but distinct elements:

- word reading, including phonological awareness, grapheme-phoneme correspondence, blending and increasing fluency
- language comprehension, including vocabulary, background knowledge and understanding spoken and written language

Children need secure foundations in both word reading and language comprehension to become successful readers (EEF, 2018b; EEF, 2025c).

This distinction matters because broad descriptions such as “behind in reading” do not identify the precise curriculum need. Adults need to establish whether further teaching is required in word reading, language comprehension or both (EEF, 2018b; EEF, 2025c).

You might notice whether a child can:

Word reading

- recognise taught grapheme-phoneme correspondences
- blend sounds to read words
- read a decodable sentence with increasing fluency

Language comprehension

- explain the meaning of vocabulary
- recall and connect events
- make and justify a prediction
- infer a character’s motive or feeling

Progress in one element does not guarantee progress in the other. Phonics can improve the accuracy of word reading, but it does not necessarily improve comprehension. Vocabulary, background knowledge and understanding of spoken and written language therefore need deliberate development through rich texts, discussion, modelling and opportunities to explain ideas (EEF, 2018b; EEF, 2025c; Shanahan, 2005).

Equally, rich discussion should not replace systematic phonics. Children need organised, cumulative teaching that connects sounds with written representations and gives them opportunities to apply taught knowledge in reading and spelling (EEF, 2025c).

Assessment should therefore avoid treating one successful response as evidence of complete reading development. Adults can use a small amount of

precise information to decide whether the child needs further phonics teaching, vocabulary development, comprehension work or a combination (EEF, 2018b).

The curriculum question is: Where does this sequence teach children how to read the words, and where does it help them understand what those words mean?

Keeping both elements visible prevents accurate decoding from concealing limited comprehension and prevents developing phonics knowledge from obscuring a child's strengths as a meaning-maker.

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Teach both elements deliberately and connect them

In your setting you may have established a balanced early literacy curriculum which does not treat phonics, stories, vocabulary, comprehension and writing as interchangeable. You will appreciate that each contributes something different, but they should connect coherently across children's experiences (EEF, 2018b).

Word reading requires explicit and systematic teaching. Children need an organised sequence through which they learn grapheme-phoneme correspondences, practise blending and apply taught knowledge in carefully matched reading materials (EEF, 2025c).

Language comprehension can also be taught deliberately. Evidence on comprehension highlights modelling, questioning, summarising, monitoring understanding and discussing how information within a text connects (Shanahan, 2005).

A gradual movement from modelling to guided participation and greater independence may look like this:

- Adult modelling: "The bird keeps returning to the tree. I think it hopes the nest will no longer be empty."
- Guided discussion: "What has happened earlier in the story that could support that idea?"
- Increasing independence: Children retell, draw or act out the story and explain the connection without the adult directing every response.

This movement helps make comprehension strategies visible before children are expected to use them with less support (Shanahan, 2005).

Adults should provide frequent opportunities to read with and to children, develop vocabulary and encourage predictions, explanations and connections

within texts (EEF, 2018b; Shanahan, 2005). These experiences should sit alongside daily systematic phonics rather than compete with it, because word reading and language comprehension require related but distinct teaching (EEF, 2018b; EEF, 2025c).

One story might therefore support several clear intentions:

- phonics teaching focuses on reading words containing taught correspondences
- shared reading develops vocabulary and comprehension
- guided discussion helps children connect events
- play and retelling allow children to apply language and narrative knowledge
- purposeful writing gives children a reason to communicate an idea

The same text can provide coherence across these experiences, but adults should remain clear about which literacy knowledge or capability is being developed at each point (EEF, 2018b; Shanahan, 2005; EEF, 2025c; DfE, 2024).

This requires an appropriate balance of intentional teaching, adult-guided experiences and child-initiated play. Play can provide valuable opportunities to revisit and apply story language and ideas, but children should not be expected to discover phonics knowledge or comprehension strategies independently. Important content still needs deliberate explanation, modelling and guided practice (EEF, 2018b; EEF, 2025c; Shanahan, 2005; Ofsted, 2022a).

A balanced curriculum does not dilute systematic phonics. Nor does it assume that decoding alone constitutes reading. It develops accurate word reading within a wider environment of language, knowledge, stories, discussion and meaningful communication (EEF, 2018b; EEF, 2025c; Shanahan, 2005).

[Click to return to list of evidence](#)

Remove barriers without changing the intended learning

Children with SEND are entitled to an education that is appropriate to their needs, promotes high standards and supports them to fulfil their potential (DfE, 2015).

For curriculum design, this means beginning with ambitious shared intentions and identifying what may prevent a child from accessing, participating in or demonstrating the intended learning. The starting question should not be which parts of the curriculum can be removed, but what barrier needs to be

addressed while maintaining the child's curriculum entitlement (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2026).

For example, speech, language or communication needs may affect how a child participates in whole-class discussion. They do not determine the limits of the child's comprehension or the ambition of the literacy curriculum.

Depending on the identified barrier, adults might consider:

- visual support to help the child follow a story
- key vocabulary introduced before shared reading
- additional processing time
- access to an established communication system
- pictures or objects to support an initial response
- a quieter opportunity to revisit and explain the text

These adaptations may help a child access or demonstrate the same intended learning through a different route (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2018b; EEF, 2023a; EEF, 2026).

The choice should remain responsive rather than becoming a fixed checklist. A diagnosis, label or status does not determine which adaptation will be effective. Adults should consider the child's current understanding, the demands of the task and the context in which participation becomes difficult (EEF, 2026).

Support should then be monitored to establish whether it improves learning, participation and growing independence. An adaptation should be retained, refined or reduced according to its impact, rather than continuing simply because it was previously considered helpful (EEF, 2026).

Assessment can draw on professional interaction, targeted observation and information from parents and carers to build a holistic picture of what a child understands and needs (DfE, 2015).

Adults should also distinguish between changing the assessment format and changing the learning being assessed. A different way of responding may help reveal the intended understanding without reducing its complexity (Wiliam, 2010; EEF, 2026).

For example, allowing a child to sequence pictures, use objects or communicate through an established system may help demonstrate narrative comprehension. Asking the child only to match isolated pictures because this appears easier could unintentionally reduce the thinking required and assess a different capability.

The curriculum-design question is: What barrier is preventing this child from accessing or demonstrating the intended literacy learning, and what can adults change while retaining its ambition?

The response format, level of prompting or route into the task may need to change. The intended knowledge should remain clear so that adults can judge whether the adaptation reveals understanding, supports participation and helps the child progress with increasing independence (Wiliam, 2010; EEF, 2026).

An appropriate curriculum is not a reduced curriculum. It combines clear entitlement, accessible teaching and carefully reviewed support so that children with SEND can learn alongside their peers, participate in shared experiences and achieve their best (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2026).

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Make targeted intervention a bridge to shared learning

You may have experienced interventions that are valuable in themselves but only loosely connected to what children encounter in the classroom. Children can become successful within the group without applying the learning during stories, play or wider teaching.

Targeted intervention is more likely to improve outcomes when it addresses a precise need, is delivered well and remains closely connected to the shared curriculum (Sibieta et al., 2016; EEF, 2019; EEF, 2023b; EEF, 2026).

Before planning additional teaching, adults should clarify:

- the specific language capability being strengthened
- how the content connects with current Reception learning
- where the child will apply it outside the group
- what successful progress will look like
- how much shared curriculum time the child will miss

For example, a targeted session might rehearse vocabulary and narrative structures from a current class story before the child returns to use them during shared reading or play. This makes the intervention a preparation for participation rather than a parallel literacy curriculum.

Timing also matters. If a child regularly leaves during shared reading, they may miss stories, vocabulary, adult modelling and peer discussion that are themselves important for language development (EEF, 2018b).

Adults might therefore:

- schedule intervention outside core shared-reading experiences

- use the intervention to prepare for or revisit the same text
- ensure the intervention adult understands the curriculum intention
- plan where the child will use the taught language in class
- share effective strategies with other adults

Targeted intervention should be timely, closely aligned with the Reception curriculum and minimise unnecessary time away from shared classroom experiences. It should include clear measures of success and enable children to apply their learning effectively within everyday provision (EEF, 2026).

This does not mean that every intervention must occur inside the classroom. Some focused teaching may require a quieter space. The important issue is whether the support strengthens access to shared learning and whether the benefit justifies what the child misses (DfE, 2015; EEF, 2026).

Targeted support should supplement high-quality universal provision, not replace it (EEF, 2026).

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Chapter 3: Further reading

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