Characteristics of Effective Learning
An Introduction and Guide for Parents

When your child is observed as they play at nursery or preschool, their Key Person will be assessing their learning against the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum. Part of this curriculum is known as the 'Characteristics of Effective Learning' (COEL) which focuses on how your child is learning to learn, rather than what they are learning. Unlike other aspects of the EYFS curriculum, the Characteristics of Effective Learning are not divided into age bands. 'Learning to learn' can be observed at any age.

The Characteristics of Effective Learning are divided into three areas:

Playing and Exploring

This aspect covers how engaged a child is in the world around them and how involved they are with their activities. It looks at wether a child feels confident to 'have a go' at new activities and try new ways of doing things. It also covers how children experience the world around them. As adults, we often witness a child's perspective whilst they are acting out everyday experiences in role play, such as playing 'Mummies & Daddies'

Active Learning

This covers how motivated a child is in their play and learning. By looking at how involved a child is in their activity and at how long they concentrate for, practitioners can assess how 'into' the activity a child is. Within Active Learning, practitioners also observe children's resilience inlearning. If they try something and it doesn't work, do they try again? it also includes observing how a child feels once they have met a goal set for themselves. Are they proud of their achievements?

Creating and Thinking Critically

This aspect looks at how a child is developing thinking skills. This includes behaviours such as solving problems they come across, having their own ideas about how to achieve the challenges they set themselves, and testing these ideas. As children become more verbal, it includes making predictions about what will happen next and also considering how well their approach to solving their problem has worked. If they could do it again, would they do anything differently?

It is possible to see the Characteristics of Effective Learning at any age. It is just the situations encountered that become more complex as a child develops in age and ability. Although a 12-month-old and a five-year- old do very different things, it is possible to observe them 'learning to learn' at their own developmental levels.

Examples of how children of different ages may display Characteristics of Effective Learning are described below.

Playing and Exploring

A 12-month-old may observe a person closely and watch what the person is doing, and then they may engage the person with eye contact and a smile. A five-year-old may role play a trip to the supermarket and be able to reference specific brands and what they will be used for. Both children are making sense of the world they live in.

Active Learning

A 12-month-old may persist in trying to put a hat on their head. It may take many tries to co-ordinate, they may have to use their eyes or voice to get help, but they will eventually succeed in reaching their goal and will be very pleased with themselves. A five-year-old may need to get changed for P.E. This takes concentration to complete a task without becoming distracted by a friend already dressed, and a few attempts to undo the buttons on their polo t-shirt. The five-year-old will be very pleased to have got dressed all by themselves.

Creating and Thinking Critically

A hungry 12-month-old may be able to discover which end of the spoon to eat with based on the amount of food that enters their mouth when they attempt to eat with either end of the spoon. The baby may then turn their spoon around and eat with the end that gives them the largest mouthful. A five-year-old may build a den, and then make adjustments to it in order to fit in a friend. Both children have a problem to solve, both children have planned and made decisions about how to solve the problem, and both have reached their goal.