

# IN THE RECEPTION CLASSROOM, PLAY IS THE NEW WORK!

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Schools across the land have been refining their practice to accommodate the precepts of the Early Years Foundation Stage, the statutory framework within which all children up to the age of five must now be taught. Like most 'new' initiatives in education, the EYFS has at its heart the principles that have been inspiring the best teaching since time began. There is nothing revolutionary in the notion that a young child will learn best in a stimulating, playful environment in which physical movement, encouragement to follow his own interests and warm engagement with adults are integral to his experience.

## SO WHAT HAS CHANGED?

For one thing, independent schools must now look carefully at how the more traditional things are managed. How are high reading standards ensured? How is the transition into the more formal environment of Year One dealt with? How are the children's attainment measured in order to plan the next stage of their learning? And how is all this handled without compromising the role of the child as the initiator of his own learning?

## HERE'S HOW: PLANNED DIVERSITY

Walk into a Reception lesson and you may well see what might look like a three-ringed circus. Several different activities are going on simultaneously. Some boys may be dressed up as postmen or pirates, others are tracing letters, some are singing as they cut and stick and there

is probably one boy deep in conversation with his teacher, decoding and discussing the latest book from the reading scheme.

While this is going on, brief but telling assessments of the boys' use of language, number and social skills are being recorded by staff who may also be dressed up as pirates or postmen in order to model and encourage the language and processes of constructive play.

## AND THE LEARNING?

Well, here is a recent example of how it works. While finding out about People Who Help Us, the boys became very interested in images of fire-fighters in the classroom library books. Taking up their enthusiasm, staff arranged for a visit, for which we prepared carefully. As whole classes, we taught the vocabulary and syntax needed for the boys to be able to question their visitors, we explored mathematical concepts such as comparison, measure and counting through the theme of fire and safety. We then welcomed a team of fire-fighters and, more importantly, their very exciting fire engine!

The boys were confident to ask questions because they had been given the tools they needed; having learned social norms at school and at home, they were eager to engage in the highly meaningful task of writing 'Thank you' letters to their visitors, using the reading and writing skills and key

vocabulary they had been formally taught. Finally, one afternoon, staff placed two large cardboard boxes in the middle of the floor. In no time at all, the boys had initiated a collaborative project to transform these into fire engines.

To the uninitiated, the result was a vast mess of red collage and felt pen with umpteen wheels (everyone wanted to make a wheel) and enough ladders and hoses to extinguish every fire in Hertfordshire. But what the staff saw was a perfect example of spontaneous learning transfer: boys were comparing and recording the heights of their ladders, they were creating number plates, drawing pieces of equipment and attempting to use their phonic knowledge to label them. It was the very essence of learning through play.

To make this work, children need adults to join in, not to take over, but to join in. Making the most of the schools setting whether that be a beautiful new outdoor classroom and throughout the woods and fields or not, the boys can run and be free, a wonderful and vital part of their experience; but to turn what they are taught into something they have actually learned, we offer them close and constant contact with sensitive, well-qualified teachers and assistants. Our job is to lead a boy to the horizon, then inspire him to step beyond it alone. That moment of alchemy between adult and child is what it has always been, regardless of initiatives that come and go.

