

Babies and toddlers: Amazing learners



Video 1
Learning about me



Video 2
Learning about others



Video 3
Learning about my world

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Introduction

To convince yourself that children in the first three years are amazing learners, all you have to do is to picture a very young baby and a three year old. The contrast in what they know, can do and understand is phenomenal. Learning in the first three years is significant in part because skills, understandings and dispositions acquired lay the foundation for success in school and in life. Of course, supporting learning is not only about investing in the future but also about contributing to the quality of children's lives in the present.

There are many obvious milestones and achievements – walking, talking, running, jumping and learning self-help skills such as eating independently and using implements and tools. However, much of the evidence of babies' and toddlers' learning is subtle and may go unnoticed, be misinterpreted or may simply be labelled as 'cute'. Babies are described as 'boring' by some people. Adults must look and listen carefully and bring to their relationships with very young children considerable knowledge and awareness of what to look and listen for in order to recognise what is happening. In other words, 'the more you know the more you see'.

Purpose

The three videos in this collection highlight and showcase selected examples of significant learning in the birth-to-three-years period. The aim is to make babies' and toddlers' learning visible and, by doing so, to expand awareness and appreciation of it. As a result, professionals will look more closely, reflect on what babies' and toddlers' behaviour means, adopt an image of babies and toddlers as capable and competent learners, and enact this image in their work.

The videos include a few examples of learning that may amaze and impress viewers, but most of the learning shown is 'everyday learning' that occurs frequently and in a variety of settings. Anyone who observes very young children carefully will recognise these behaviours and be aware of many more.

While there are obvious direct implications for pedagogy and practice, the focus of the videos is on children's learning rather than on practices that support that learning.

Audience

The intended audience for the videos is the broad range of early childhood professionals for whom the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) was written. This audience includes early childhood professionals working in maternal and child health, family day care, supported playgroups, early childhood intervention, child and family support, outside school hours care, kindergarten, long day care, the early years of school and programs for young children in cultural institutions such as libraries, museums and art galleries.

The videos could also be used with families who have children aged under three years.

Topics and context

Current thinking about early learning (including development) links it to children's 'belonging, being and becoming' (DEEWR, 2009). Children's learning can be described using five Learning Outcomes: communication, identity, connection and contribution to community, wellbeing and confidence as learners. These five areas incorporate traditional ways of categorising learning by developmental domains (social, cognitive, emotional, language, large motor skills, small motor skills).

Another way of categorising learning in the first three years is to say that babies and toddlers are learning about:

- themselves (Video 1: Learning about me)
- others (Video 2: Learning about others)
- the world around them (Video 3: Learning about my world).

Careful attention to children leads to insights about what they have already learned, the learning they are consolidating or practising, and what they are in the process of learning.

Although each video can be used on its own, there are connections and similar messages across the three videos. Much of the learning depicted illustrates learning about self (me), others and the world (my world) simultaneously – that is, evidence of learning in one area usually illustrates learning in other areas. This interconnectedness illustrates the holistic nature of children's learning.

Length

Videos 1 and 3 each run for approximately 15 minutes, and Video 2 runs for approximately 10 minutes.

Key messages

There are some important messages that are implicit or explicit in all three videos, including:

- Children are active learners from birth – agents, active constructors of, and contributors to, their learning and experience, and that of others.
- Babies and toddlers are motivated from within to learn. They seem to have ‘a built-in drive to learn from everything around them’ (Early Childhood Australia 2013, p. 3).
- Secure trusting relationships are a crucial foundation for all categories of learning. When very young children feel safe and are confident that their needs will be met, these relationships free them to take advantage of opportunities around them.
- Children learn largely through relationships and interactions with important others and through active engagement with their world.
- Learning occurs all the time – in everyday experiences.
- ‘Children learn at different rates, in different ways and at different times. Their development is not always easy or straightforward’ (DEEWR, p. 17).
- Babies and toddlers are great communicators, even before they are able to use language fluently. They communicate through facial expressions, gestures such as pointing, crying, babbling, using single words, stringing sounds together with the occasional understandable word and constructing simple sentences. Their communication requires close attention in order to understand them.
- Play and exploration are important vehicles for learning about self, others and the world.
- The more adults appreciate babies’ and toddlers’ learning, the more effectively they can support it.

Rationale for the age range of the children

The children in the videos range in age from under one year to close to three years, with the majority being between one and two years old.

The learning opportunities in the present and in the past that children the same age have vary because of culture, experience, health status, family, opportunities, interests and temperament, among other factors. While there is a wide range of learning at any age, the second year of life is when babies 'transition' into being toddlers. Their mobility increases, they become more independent, begin to assert themselves, and demonstrate that they have considerable understanding of language. In other words, the second year is a time of particular advances in learning and development.

Because children in this age range do not yet have fluent verbal communication skills, there is an element of mystery about their learning. Adults, including experienced early childhood professionals, wonder at times about the meaning of behaviour, sometimes missing the significance of the behaviour and what it demonstrates about learning, and may misinterpret behaviour.

Choice of setting

The children filmed were participating in an education and care service. However, the learning depicted can occur in any setting – at home, in a playgroup or out in the community.

Length of segments of learning

Because of restrictions on the length of the videos, they depict brief samples rather than the whole duration of the children learning – that is, the amount of time they spent on one experience. There were many examples of children staying with one experience for a very long time. This defies one of the erroneous perceptions about very young children – namely, that they have short attention spans. This perception may arise largely from the fact that often what engages children's attention is not what adults expect or would like for them to attend to!

Uniqueness of each child

The different temperaments and personal styles of the children are evident in the segments, in addition to different abilities and interests. Some children are more confident, more active, more likely to interact with other children, noisier, more outgoing or more expressive. It may be worth pointing out to viewers that these differences are evident at a very early age – from infancy.

Each child has different strengths and abilities, and their learning and development trajectory is unique. One child in the videos has been diagnosed with a global developmental delay, and a couple of the children are undergoing formal assessment. One child is blind and has been from birth.

Links to the Frameworks

There are obvious links between the content of the video and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) and the national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The Learning Outcomes, which the two Frameworks share, as well as some of the key ideas in each Framework, apply directly to the video content – in particular, the themes of belonging, being and becoming (central to the EYLF).

The Learning Outcomes in the EYLF and VEYLDF describe a broad range of categories of learning beginning at birth. Children develop and learn in all of these areas in the first three years. Particular evidence of learning and development as described in the Learning Outcomes includes what has traditionally been referred to as developmental milestones as well as many other categories of learning.

Any example of evidence of learning is likely to link to several Learning Outcomes. This means of course that much of the footage captured could appear in more than one of the videos, and this does occur.

Using the videos

There are a number of ways that the three videos can be used, either singly or together. The content overlaps, and each can be used independently.

The visual footage lends itself to discussion about the likely learning that is occurring. Critical reflection, analysis, wondering, discussing with colleagues and families, and asking questions are imperative. It is especially important with very young children to go beyond the obvious in interpreting behaviour and finding the learning.

Facilitators may need to actively encourage viewers to look and listen closely. Why is evidence of learning less obvious in the first three years? What is the role of analysis and interpretation? If viewers don't engage deeply, they may illustrate the main point of the videos – that much significant learning in the first three years is subtle and easily missed.

Keep in mind that what children are learning or demonstrating that they have learned is different to their behaviour, what they are doing.

Before showing a video, ask participants some questions about their ideas about learning in the first three years. Questions could include the following:

- What are babies and toddlers learning in the first three years?
- What learning is most important?
- How do babies and toddlers learn?
- What role do relationships play in learning in the first three years?
- What interferes with learning in the first three years?
- How would you describe the main role of adults in babies' and toddlers' learning?
- What is the role of other children in babies' and toddlers' learning?
- How does the challenge of communicating in words affect learning?

These questions could also be the subject of a discussion after viewing a video.

Suggested questions to use with any or part of the three videos

- What are the children learning?
- How are they learning?
- This video shows only a few examples of this area of learning. What are some other examples of learning about self/others/the world?
- What can you tell about each child's style and temperament from watching the video?
- Almost all of the vignettes in each video also illustrate learning in other areas. Discuss the implications of this. Choose a particular vignette and discuss how it relates to learning about self, others and the physical world.
- How does the content of this video link with the Learning Outcomes in the VEYLDF and the EYLF?
- A further suggestion: One or several vignettes or segments of children learning could be shown without sound (or with sound). Ask participants to discuss the likely learning that is occurring.

Note about the children in the video

As mentioned earlier, there is one child in the videos who has been diagnosed with global developmental delay, one who has been blind since birth, and several who are currently being assessed because of concerns. These children have not been singled out in the videos as 'different' or 'special'. The footage of these children has been chosen to illustrate learning in the same ways that footage of any other children is being used. It is worth noting as background information that Elijah, the child who is blind, is Maltese and is learning both Maltese and English simultaneously. His grandparents, who appear in two of the videos, often bring him to and pick him up from the centre. Educators have a predictable routine that they follow with him each time he comes. Elijah relies heavily on oral and tactile exploration as a means of learning.



Video 1: Learning about me

Key messages

By the age of three, children know who they are. Learning Outcome 1 in the EYLF and the VEYLDF is that 'Children have a strong sense of identity'. Learning about yourself involves learning about your culture, family and communities.

Children begin to learn from birth about whether or not they are valued, their impact on other people, how much power they have, and what kind of difference they make to others.

In the first three years, children learn about themselves through their interactions with others.

Identity is closely related to belonging. Children learn who they are through messages they receive from the people they have relationships with. These relationships and messages begin at birth – some would say even before birth.

It is vital for children to learn to accept and appreciate their uniqueness and that of others.

The concept of agency relates closely to a sense of self. Children are active contributors to their own experience and learning from birth. They can initiate interactions, make choices and contribute to decisions that affect them. Children learn that they have power, and begin to learn how to use that power in constructive ways.

Children begin to learn in the first three years about their rights and responsibilities and their obligations to others. They begin to learn how to assert themselves.

A strong sense of self enables children to meet challenges and persevere.

Much of the more obvious evidence of learning fits into the category of learning to use the body and hands, the areas of learning traditionally labelled as large and small motor or physical skills. Increasing abilities in these areas contribute directly to children's sense of autonomy and independence, their exploration and their ability to make things happen.

Although children's personal styles differ, and some are more outgoing than others, initiating interactions and communicating needs and preferences are evidence of a strong emerging sense of self.

Children feel capable and confident when they know the routine, have some control over their experience, and can predict what is going to happen.

Children's sense of self and identity builds when they make contributions to the groups they are members of, when they perceive that they are doing something useful or 'helping'.

Through asserting themselves, children learn about themselves and others.

At this age, children can begin to take some responsibility for themselves, particularly for their physical wellbeing.

Communication and self-expression take many forms in the first three years.

What to look for in the video

This video contains evidence of children demonstrating through their behaviour that they know the routine. They can predict what is going to happen. Over time they develop habits that display their awareness of 'this is the way we do things' here. They exercise a degree of control over their experience.

The video also depicts a variety of different ways of communicating – through behaviour, expressions, gestures, babbling, single words, jargoning, putting words together and using sentences.

Some examples of evidence

Following are some examples of 'everyday' behaviours that may be evidence of learning about self. Some of these examples appear in the videos:

- efforts to wash hands, dress and undress, serve their own food and eat independently
- 'helping' with daily living routines such as setting the table, folding laundry, wiping the table and tidying up
- choosing food, clothing, books or toys
- identifying their possessions or the special place to store their belongings
- moving objects around, making changes in the environment
- comforting themselves and seeking comfort from others
- demonstrating feelings of security – moving away from a trusted adult for example
- showing confidence
- persevering when there is an obstacle or challenge (perhaps in play or when eating independently)
- recognising and celebrating their achievements and successes
- showing the beginnings of self-control (self-regulation)
- coping with changes
- approaching new situations with confidence
- coping with frustration
- initiating interactions with another child or an adult.



Video 2: Learning about others

Key messages

Learning about others and learning to be with others is a complex and multifaceted area of learning that begins at birth and lasts a lifetime. The EYLF, VEYLDF and Framework for School Age Care (*My Time, Our Place*, DEEWR, 2011) include this area of learning within the Learning Outcome 'Children are connected with and contribute to their world'.

Learning about others and learning to be with others includes what has traditionally been labelled social skills.

There is a strong connection between learning about and being with others and belonging – belonging to family, culture and community. From infancy children begin to learn what it means to belong and to contribute to others' sense of belonging.

Learning how to relate to others as individuals and to be a member of a group occurs alongside learning about oneself. Children develop a sense of identity, who they are, from their interactions with others, and the messages they receive from others.

A strong, warm, secure relationship with at least one trusted adult is a platform for forming additional relationships. This relationship operates as a kind of base that children can venture out from to explore the physical and social worlds, and return to as needed for comfort and support.

Children's most powerful lessons about how to relate to others come from their own experiences and the ways others relate to them.

Learning to be with others involves experiencing, valuing and balancing independence and interdependence, experiencing the give-and-take of interactions and learning to negotiate and compromise.

As children get older, the number and variety of people they interact with and relate to, and the number of groups they belong to, increases.

Children establish lasting friendships from an early age, much earlier than previously thought.

Learning about their own and others' responsibilities and rights begins in infancy.

Babies begin to observe and explore how people are similar to and different from them. Attitudes to various kinds of diversity and difference are learned largely from the attitudes communicated by important people in children's lives. It is crucial that children learn to be comfortable with difference and diversity.

Feeling empathy and expressing it effectively have to be learned. Experiencing empathy towards themselves enables children to learn about it.

Learning to constructively resolve conflicts begins in infancy.

As children's ability to communicate with language increases, so does their capacity to have effective and sustained interactions with other children. In other words, language is an important and powerful vehicle for relating.

What to look for in the video

The video contains a number of brief encounters between very young children. It is interesting to reflect on what they are learning in these encounters.

There are examples of the close connection between learning about oneself and learning about others. They are inextricably intertwined!

Some examples of evidence

Some examples of 'everyday' behaviours that may be evidence of learning about others include the following. Some of these examples appear in the videos:

- two or more children interacting with or playing together, even briefly
- cooperating and collaborating
- comforting another child
- joining in others' play
- being gentle with another child
- demonstrating understanding of something someone said
- communicating through behaviour, gestures or words
- being comforted by others – using an adult for comfort and/or support
- identifying one's own possessions and/or the possessions of others
- recognising and showing pleasure in others' company or presence – for example greeting or farewelling another child
- seeking the company of others
- beginning friendships
- beginning capacity to 'read' the behaviour of others
- showing some awareness of the needs and rights of others
- learning through modelling, demonstration and watching or listening to others
- asking for help from others
- initiating interactions
- separating from family and transitioning into a group.



Video 3: Learning about my world

Key messages

Babies and toddlers use every one of their senses and abilities to explore and find out about the physical world. Over the first three years the variety of ways they have to interact with the physical world expands exponentially, and skills acquired very early become more refined.

From very early in life children show that they like to have an impact, to make something happen or make a difference.

Throughout the first three years children demonstrate that they enjoy putting together and taking apart, stacking and knocking down, fitting things inside other things, moving objects from one place to another, filling up containers and dumping contents. They also enjoy sorting and classifying objects and display increasing understanding of categories.

Over the first three years increasing intentionality and purposefulness become increasingly evident in children's play and other activities.

Very early in life children display evidence of having a plan and awareness of needing to do things in a particular order to achieve a desired outcome.

Babies go through a period of exploring and experimenting with the properties of objects and what they can do before they can use them purposefully as tools.

Children under three years also learn from watching and listening. Demonstration and modelling by others often result directly in children demonstrating new skills and understandings. As is true of all areas of learning, the ability to understand language, and then use it in ways that can be understood by others, adds immeasurably to children's ability to learn.

Children under three years often demonstrate in their pretend play that they know the uses of objects. Books offer a particularly rich variety of opportunities to learn about the world, as well as oneself and other people!

What to look for in the video

At first glance much of babies' and young toddlers' play and investigating seems rather aimless. There are a number of examples in the video of children pouring or banging an object, seemingly just to make noise. However, the level of concentration that they display makes it clear that learning is occurring. The degree and length of concentration are probably good indicators of the amount of learning that is likely to be occurring.

There are several examples in the video where the deep engagement of a child, or a couple of children, in an experience seems to attract other children.

It is possible to get clues about children's different learning styles from the video. Some children are much more actively engaged than others, for example, and some watch intently.

Some examples of evidence

Following are some examples of 'everyday' behaviours that may be evidence of learning about my world. Some of these examples appear in the videos:

- figuring out how a toy or something else works
- using paint, textas, pens or other 'creative' materials
- turning on a tap
- pouring
- dropping or throwing objects
- emptying and filling containers
- doing a task in a certain order – for example, putting on socks before shoes
- building using blocks – putting a larger block at the bottom of a stack
- using an object as a tool or implement (for example, using a spade or broom, or using tongs to serve food)
- pouring a 'pretend' cup of tea
- fitting things together – attempting or completing a jigsaw puzzle, for example
- holding a book the right way up, turning pages, going from front to back, studying pictures, 'reading' to oneself.

Appendix – Transcripts of video narration

Video 1: Learning about me

Hello, I'm Anne Stonehouse. This video is about children as active learners from birth. They seek opportunities to learn from everything around them. They learn largely through relationships and interactions with the people who are important to them, especially their families, and through active engagement with their world.

Picture a newborn baby and a three year old. That should be enough to convince you that the learning that takes place in the first three years is unrivalled by the amount and importance of learning at any other time in life. If you look at babies and toddlers attentively and think about what's really happening, you can see the beginnings of skills and understandings that will grow over a lifetime and that are often more readily recognised later. Very early learning not only lays the foundations for later learning and success in school and life, it is also important for the quality of life in the present. Early learning is particularly powerful simply because it happens first – what you learn first you learn best.

Most people recognise obvious milestones in the first three years, such as walking and using words, but much of the evidence of babies' and toddlers' learning is subtle and easily missed unless you know what you are looking for.

One of the broad categories of learning is learning about yourself – who you are. Babies and toddlers are developing a picture of themselves, a sense of identity, and it is crucial that this sense of identity is strong and positive.

The idea of who you are comes from your relationships, which begin at birth – some would say even before birth. Feeling a sense of belonging to your family, of course, is fundamental. That sense of belonging expands over time to other people and to groups you are a part of.

Recognising and welcoming others and being welcomed contributes to a strong sense of identity.

In the first three years children learn about themselves through their interactions with others – both adults and other children. They learn whether or not they are valued and what kind of difference they make to others.

All children need the opportunity to see themselves as capable and competent, as active powerful contributors to their own experience and that of others. The concept of children's agency refers to the need for children to have choices, make decisions and have some control over their daily lives – to understand that they make a positive difference and that they can engage others and have their full attention.

Knowing the routine – being able to predict what's going to happen next – strengthens feelings of empowerment. Children feel more secure when they have a sense of 'I know how we do things here'.

They feel valued when they see that they are doing something useful, 'helping'.

Taking an active part in their own daily lives strengthens that sense of agency – I can do it! – and builds feelings of competence and confidence. When they help adults and other children, the sense of being a valued member of a family or other group builds. They learn about how good it feels to achieve and to contribute. This learning is the beginning of learning how to be a citizen, a community member.

Babies and toddlers take some small steps towards autonomy and independence, and begin to do things for themselves. They start learning how to look after their health and wellbeing.

Through these actions they learn 'habits', or ways of going about their daily lives, that are likely to be long lasting.

With babies and toddlers, many of the learning opportunities arise in daily living experiences, as they get ready to rest and sleep, wash their hands, serve food, pour their drinks, eat, put on and take off shoes and socks, help to set up and tidy up.

The physical environment can support a sense of agency. In other words, it's important for children to find their own opportunities to

learn what they can do. Children in this setting sleep on mats on the floor, which allows them to decide themselves when they want to get up.

Children also learn to manage frustration, and learn when and how to get help. Knowing that help and support are available is an important contributor to a strong sense of identity.

Succeeding, meeting a challenge, is a cause for celebration, and it's especially good if there's someone to share it with.

Babies and toddlers are great communicators, even before they are able to use language fluently. They learn to communicate and express themselves in a variety of ways – with gestures, facial expressions, through crying and with sounds and eventually words.

Demonstrating that they understand language and the growing ability to communicate in words is one of the most dramatic and significant changes that occurs in the first three years.

Babies and toddlers also communicate and express themselves through imitative, creative or pretend play.

Learning to coordinate and control the body is a very important and prominent area of learning in the first three years. Children under three years spend a lot of time learning new skills and practising skills already mastered.

Just moving through space – cruising – and moving objects around because you can, are massive steps forward in strengthening that sense of agency and making a difference.

Simply walking over uneven surfaces or turning a corner is a challenge. You have to learn how to pick up an object off the ground without losing your balance – that's not easy.

Learning to use hands and fingers in ever-increasingly complex ways promotes independence, exploration and experimentation.

When they have exposure to various kinds of tools, children initially explore them and then move on to using them for a purpose.

When they use paintbrushes and pencils they are learning basic skills that much later will allow them to draw, paint pictures and write.

Learning to control your behaviour – being able to stop yourself from doing something you want to do – is challenging. In fact it's not only children who struggle with self-control. Learning self-control involves learning how to express strong feelings as well as learning to go along and cooperate with something you don't want to do at times. Sometimes you can persuade people and sometimes you can't.

Identity includes learning about your own and others' rights and responsibilities and learning to assert yourself appropriately. This is a very complex area of learning. Many adults struggle with learning to respect and care for others, and also standing up for themselves. When you're very young it's not always easy to know what the rules are, and even more challenging at times to go along with them. Learning to express your needs and wishes and finding out that others will take them into account strengthens the sense of self.

An experience that reveals differences in children's styles, their sense of belonging and their resilience is how they make the transition between being with their family and being somewhere else with other people. Arrivals at the education and care service show that each child has ways of approaching this situation.

Separating from the people you're closest to is not always easy. As children's understanding of their experience grows during the first three years, their reactions to separating change, and they need help at times to cope. This is perfectly normal and to be expected.

The sense of being a member of a community, of belonging there, begins in infancy.

To conclude, developing a strong sense of identity or sense of self is a lifelong endeavour. What is best for children is that they have a range of experiences in the first three years that teach them to be strong, confident and curious, and adults who appreciate the challenges that accompany learning about yourself.

The following vignette captures a child who is well on the way to learning these things.

Video 2: Learning about others

Hello, I'm Anne Stonehouse. This video is about very young children as active learners from birth. They seek opportunities to learn from everyone and everything around them.

Other people, both adults and children, play a number of critically important roles in children's learning. One of the most important roles of adults is to provide safety, care and security. A strong positive relationship with at least one trusted adult is essential as a base that enables children to explore the world around them and learn.

From birth children learn in a variety of ways both from and about other people. Although children are interested in other people and predisposed to form relationships from birth, they have to learn how to interact and communicate with others. This is a complex area of learning that takes a long time.

Picture a newborn baby and a three year old. That should be enough to convince you that the learning that takes place in the first three years is unrivalled by learning at any other time in life. If you observe very young children closely and think about what's really happening, you see the beginnings of skills and understandings that will grow over a lifetime. It's easier to recognise these skills and understandings when children are older. In other words, they are more obvious.

Very early learning not only lays the foundations for later learning and success in school and life, it is also important for children's quality of life in the present. In other words, one of the many reasons that early learning is particularly powerful is simply because it happens first – what you learn first you learn best.

Almost everyone recognises obvious milestones in the first three years, such as walking and using words, but much of the evidence of babies' and toddlers' learning is subtle and easily missed unless you know what you are looking for.

Communication is integral to relating to others. While babies and toddlers are very skilled communicators, their interactions, especially with each other, are made more challenging by the fact that only as they approach their third birthday do they become skilled at expressing needs, wants and feelings in words.

So, what are some of the crucial skills that children under three need to master and some of the understandings that they need to gain?

Most importantly, they need to learn that being in others' company is pleasurable and positive. They need to experience the sheer joy of sharing a laugh or celebrating a success with someone else or just being together.

It feels good to simply be in the company of another person. They need to learn when and how to ask for help. They learn how to invite others into their play and exploration.

The give and take of interactions with other children is an especially complex area of learning in the first three years. Babies and toddlers are learning to control their behaviour – a hard thing to learn. Encounters with others can change quickly from comfortable, happy and relaxed to modest altercations or conflicts – and back again.

Through playing with others, babies and toddlers learn to negotiate, to compromise, to begin to understand some basics about their own and others' rights and responsibilities.

Children learn to be with others by having the opportunity to interact with them. They need to have encounters.

Most babies and toddlers have to learn to cope with other children being nearby, being interested in what they are doing – sometimes contributing in positive ways and at other times interfering. The presence of a trusted adult often is enough to help children learn to be with other children. Often an adult has to intervene to ensure that children learn constructive ways to assert themselves, respect their own and others' rights and resolve conflicts.

Beginning in infancy, child learn from their own experience of being cared for about how to care for others. The aim is for them to learn to be welcoming, generous and caring – and to initiate interactions in gentle and appropriate ways.

A key dimension of a sense of belonging is learning that you can help others and that others can help you.

Children learn a lot from other children. And even very young children gain satisfaction from teaching others.

Learning about others continues throughout life. Essentially it's about learning how to belong, to be a member of a family and other groups, to be comfortable with diversity and difference, to have a sense of belonging and to contribute to others' sense of belonging.

Strong relationships with others are the cornerstone of not only belonging but also of identity. In addition they are the foundation for being a confident learner and explorer of the world.

Video 3: Learning about my world

Hello, I'm Anne Stonehouse. This video is about very young children as active learners from birth. They seek opportunities to learn from everyone and everything around them.

In addition to learning about themselves and other people, babies and toddlers are learning about the physical or material world around them. It has been said that under three-year-olds are dedicated scientists who explore and experiment whenever they have the opportunity. By the age of three you can see evidence that they know a lot about how the world works.

These three focus areas for learning – self, others, and the physical world – are inextricably inter-connected – that is, when children are learning in one area they are almost always learning in one or both of the other areas.

From birth, children use all the abilities they have to explore the world around them. They are fascinated by most things and keen to figure out how things work. As they get older, their abilities expand, giving them an increasing variety of ways to explore the world around them.

Picture a newborn baby and a three-year-old. That should be enough to convince you that the learning that takes place in the first three years is unrivalled by the amount and variety of learning at any other time in life. If you look closely and attentively at very young children and think about what's really happening, you see the beginnings of skills and understandings that will grow over a lifetime and that are often more readily recognised by others as learning when children are older.

Very early learning not only lays the foundations for later learning and success in school and life, but it is also important for the quality of children's lives in the present. Early learning is particularly powerful simply because it happens first – what you learn first you learn best.

Almost everyone recognises obvious milestones in the first three years, such as naming objects or catching or throwing a ball, but much of the evidence of babies' and toddlers' learning is subtle and easily missed unless you know what you are looking for.

Very young babies explore, using their senses and all the skills they have. Having an impact, or making something happen, interests them and nurtures a sense of agency, of being able to have an impact.

Babies explore the properties of objects and experiment with what these objects can do.

At an early age babies demonstrate that they recognise objects and that they have learned something about their uses. You can see this in early pretend play, which, when children are older, becomes complex dramatic play.

At times their explorations can appear to be somewhat random or aimless. Typical actions such as banging a saucepan or sticking icy-pole sticks into clay may seem pointless, but they are learning through doing these things. It may not always be clear what they are learning, but their obvious deep concentration and often delight in what they are doing is strong evidence that the activity contributes to learning. Children's deep engagement seems to attract other children.

It is clear that babies and toddlers work hard to learn.

As they get older the range of ways that they have to explore and investigate increase tremendously. Their encounters with objects and the physical world become more intentional. Their purposes or intentions become more transparent to others. There is evidence of having a plan or an aim in mind, doing things in steps or a logical order to achieve an end.

Learning to use implements such as tongs, or even cutlery, requires coordination and several steps in order to be successful.

Using equipment requires strength, coordination and practice.

They persist as they work to solve problems and overcome obstacles. They take pleasure in practising and consolidating skills acquired.

Children also learn by observing others – both adults and other children.

The ability of children under three years of age to understand what is said to them exceeds their ability to communicate using language. This means that they learn effectively from being given instructions long before they can talk fluently, particularly when verbal instructions are accompanied by demonstration.

A particularly important area of learning is learning about a variety of kinds of texts. From infancy children can learn to enjoy books and how to use them. From conversations about the contents of books they learn many things about themselves, others and the physical world.

Noticing pictures and graphics and understanding their meaning is in itself a type of literacy.

Through direct experience children learn about the natural world and how to look after it.

They learn that building up and putting together is harder than taking apart.

As children approach their third birthday and their ability to use language has advanced substantially, they offer powerful and persuasive demonstrations every day of just how much they have learned about the world!

When you've been in it such a short time, the world is truly filled with wonderful and amazing things to learn about and to learn from!

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