

# Key principles for Cambridge Early Years

## Development of the principles for the Cambridge Early Years Programme

For the last two decades, Cambridge has worked closely with nations to support their education reviews and help ensure that their reforms result in quality improvements. As part of this work, we have undertaken extensive research on curriculum principles from high performing education systems. We focused on how approaches to key issues, such as the importance of curriculum broader aims and precise articulation of content and sequencing of learning programmes, relate to high attainment and high equity. As a result of this work, we were invited to lead the development of principles for the national curriculum in England, a framework which was designed in the period 2010 to 2013. Fully implemented in 2014, the new curriculum has resulted in enhanced results in key elements of both TIMSS and PISA.

Our international comparative work has shown the importance of principles such as:

- focus, rigour and coherence
- powerful knowledge
- balance of concepts, principles, fundamental operations and core knowledge
- fewer things in greater depth in the primary phase
- social learning
- values and dispositions.

A few decades ago, work on the broader aims of national curricula was dominant. Now, however, sophisticated statement of curriculum principles is possible, and can be grounded in strong evidence on system performance.

In contrast to the attention paid to compulsory schooling, early years provision has been a late focus of many nations. Only in the last two decades have highly mature early years frameworks emerged, associated with high quality research on the quality of early years settings. Pre-eminent amongst this research is the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project in England. At its outset in the late nineties, the EPPE project could only find measurement tools associated with the emotional and social development of young children. They needed to develop their own measures of cognitive development – and their subsequent empirical work showed the importance of balanced cognitive and emotional/social development.

The analysis of the characteristics of high quality early years provision has included analysis of the characteristics, management and professional training of early years professionals, which has enhanced understanding of essential techniques such as observation and assessment. The Cambridge Early Years Curriculum has benefitted from our wide-ranging transnational research work on curriculum principles, synthesising this with research focussed on high quality early years provision.

The development of the principles involved an initial period of extracting and refining key principles from our international comparative work on curriculum, then a period of scrutiny and refinement by world-class scholars, researchers and practitioners in the early years arena. The resulting principles are world class, and draw from the very best research on early years provision and practice. They are wide ranging, covering:

- broader aims
- desired outcomes
- sequencing of the content of learning programmes
- models of ability
- pedagogy and didactics, and
- approaches to observation and to assessment.




A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim Oates', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Tim Oates  
Group Director, Assessment Research and Development

## Key principles for the Cambridge Early Years Programme

Cambridge has synthesised evidence and research relating to quality and impact of early years education to derive and set out the following principles:

1. A child's learning and development are shaped by social and cultural factors through the contexts of their home, community and early years settings.  
(Jensen and Rasmussen, 2019; Melhuish et al., 2017; Pufall Jones and Mistry, 2019; Sylva et al., 2010; Whalley et al., 2007)
2. Children learn most effectively when they are engaged and actively involved in their learning, supported by the practitioner through well-planned experiences which provide children with feelings of competence, agency, emotional attachment and self-worth.  
(Bandura, 1997; Deci and Ryan, 2008; Evangelou et al., 2009; Malaguzzi, 1993a, 1993b; Montessori, 1949; Moss, 2010; Papatheodorou and Moyles, 2008; Pekrun et al., 2002; Perry et al., 2019; Stewart, 2014)
3. Early years learning should be based on an appropriate balance of physical development, cognitive development, language and communication development, and social and emotional development.  
(Kumpulainen, 2018; Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004; Stephen, 2010; Sylva et al., 2010)
4. Early years pedagogy should be play-based, developmentally age-appropriate and child-centred, and should include both child-initiated and adult-led practice.  
(Broadhead, 2018; Callanan et al., 2017; Colliver, 2019; Li, 2020; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2008; Rogers, 2014; Sylva, 2010; Zosh et al., 2018)
5. Early years pedagogy should support the development of children's awareness and control of their own thinking, learning and emotions (self-regulation), supported by child-initiated play and talk about learning.  
(Berk et al., 2006; McClelland et al., 2015; Perels et al., 2010; Perry, 1998; Vallatton and Ayoub, 2011; Whitebread, 2014; Whitebread et al., 2019)
6. Language and communication development – including literacy – is a fundamental tool for learning and influences later school success; high-quality oral interactions and adult modelling are vital to development in this area.  
(Dickinson and Porche, 2011; Kuhl, 2004; Littleton et al., 2005); Melhuish et al., 2012; Mellanby, 2019; Mercer, 2018; OECD, 2006; Sammons et al., 2015)
7. Mathematics learning needs to be acquired explicitly within the whole curriculum to support development of abstract mathematical language and thinking.  
(Carr et al., 1994; Johansson, 2005; Resnick, 1988; Schoenfeld, 1992)
8. Key aspects of development are acquired quickly and readily at young ages; they require more support and structure to acquire later, and their absence may affect other areas of learning.  
(Goswami, 2015; Mellanby 2019; Oates 1995; Taggart et al., 2015)
9. Assessment or evaluation of a child's learning and development is essential for monitoring and for planning their next steps; systematic observation is fundamental to authentic and valid assessment in the early years.  
(Broadhead, 2018; Dubiel, 2014; Sylva et al., 2010)

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10. Social learning (the interaction skills required to make and maintain friendships, work in groups and succeed in society) plays an essential role in a child's individual development.  
(Kragh-Müller, 2017; Sylva et al., 2010, Taggart et al., 2015)
  11. Early years provision should support children in making a successful transition to primary school, including through the development of foundational skills and a gradual move from informal play-based pedagogy to more formal teaching.  
(Corsaro and Molinari, 2005; Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; Sylva, 2013)
  12. Focus, rigour and coherence should underpin the design and implementation of any early years programme.  
(Callanan et al., 2017; Rodger, 2012; Schmidt, 2018)

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