

# Cambridge Standards for early years practitioners

## How and why the standards were developed

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Cambridge International is committed to the ongoing improvement of educational outcomes for all Cambridge learners around the world. We have developed the Cambridge Standards for early years practitioners to define key characteristics and practices of effective educational provision for young children.

This document outlines how we developed the Cambridge Standards for early years practitioners using the latest international research into young children's development and effective learning and teaching.

In developing the Standards, we took into account not only a range of national practices, but also input from education experts around the world. This has enabled us to identify a set of practices that are common to the best practitioners globally.

### Aims of the Standards

The main purpose of the Standards is to set out the characteristics that practitioners need to deliver the Cambridge Early Years Programme effectively.

The Standards provide a benchmark of what Cambridge International considers to be practitioner quality. They can be used by practitioners to identify what they are doing well in practice and what they can improve through professional development.

Practitioners aspiring to develop their career prospects will find the Standards a helpful guide to define areas for their professional development. The Standards provide a common language and framework of expectations that will help the whole community within a setting to reflect on the effectiveness of its teaching. We recognise that early years' education enhances learning and development (UNESCO, 2010; UNICEF, nd.)

and has a substantial impact on the quality of educational outcomes over time for young children (OECD, 2018; Taggart et al., 2015; Sylva et al., 2011). It is what practitioners know and do that makes the difference in improving learning outcomes – their knowledge, pedagogical practices and relationships with children (Jensen and Rasmussen, 2019; Moss, 2010).

We also recognise that practitioners and teachers cannot sustain high-quality outcomes for all children without effective leadership (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007; Rowe et al 2012).

There are eight Cambridge Standards for early years practitioners. Each Standard contains a number of individual standard statements that are detailed and concrete.

The Standards are designed to be applicable internationally, so they do not refer to specific curricula, teaching strategies or programmes. Instead, the eight Standards draw on international early years best practice at a generic level.

As the Standards are provided as a resource for ongoing practitioner improvement, rather than accountability (OECD 2009; Waters and Payler, 2016), a single level is provided for each Standard. They focus on supporting all aspects of practitioners' professional learning and development, recognising the demands and complexity of their role.



# Rationale for the Cambridge Teacher Standards

## 1 Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of young children and how they learn and develop

Early years practitioners are empowered to support educational progression when they have a confident understanding of how young children develop and learn, both in terms of their maturation and environmental influences upon them (Rose and Gilbert, 2017). Skilled practitioners can provide rich educational opportunities by understanding key elements of neuroscience research (Goswami, 2015), which identifies children's powerful learning capacities from birth.

Practitioners who recognise the diversity within any group of children will use strategies to motivate and support all learners and their different needs and experiences. This includes an awareness of children's levels of engagement, active involvement and well-being (Laevers, 2015), as well as knowledge of any preconceptions that children may bring to the setting (Kambouri, 2016). Reflective practitioners will understand the importance of establishing positive relationships with children and all adults involved (Moss, 2010).

Understanding that children's communication skills are boosted by effective adult and child interactions within language-rich environments is crucial (Kuhl, 2004). Practitioners who recognise young children's multi-modal communication can identify and understand their early exploratory thinking (Wood and Chesworth, 2017).

## 2 Know subject and curriculum area and the overall curriculum and how to teach it

Practitioners understand that play is central to all areas of children's development and learning and that this evidence is well established across the world (UNICEF, 2018; Wood, 2015). They know that this evidence supports a play-based curriculum and early years pedagogical approaches.

Practitioners should possess a deep understanding of the subjects they teach and know how to apply their knowledge to teach children effectively (Shulman, 1986). Pedagogical knowledge ensures that professionals respond effectively to children's questions, and sequence ideas in ways that make learning accessible.

Digital technologies can be useful tools for learning and teaching. Practitioners will need to know how to maximise the effectiveness of digital technologies in their setting to enhance the learning experience (Aubrey and Dahl 2008).

An effective early years' environment will challenge and motivate children. This supports the development of children's early emergent thinking to more formal and abstract concepts in all areas of learning. This approach supports children at the point of transition to their next stage of education



### 3 Demonstrate professional practitioner values and attributes

Practitioners understand that they have considerable impact upon their learners (Jensen and Rasmussen, 2019). They will have positive expectations of all children (Rowe et al, 2012; Moss, 2010) and develop them as individuals that are full of potential (Malaguzzi 1994).

An important element of a practitioner's role is to maintain up-to-date professional expertise; this includes ongoing development of subject and pedagogical knowledge (Coe et al 2014), and working collaboratively with colleagues in the setting (OECD 2011; Waters and Payler, 2016). All practitioners also need to maintain safe, ethical and respectful conduct

Teaching, learning, assessment and reporting are inextricably linked in a celebration of the whole child and their achievements, however these are recorded. Practitioners will decide on the most appropriate records for their context, for example through 'learning stories' (Carr and Lee, 2002).

### 4 Establish professional relationships to develop and support learning and teaching

Effective practitioners develop and maintain professional relationships with learners and supporting adults. These relationships affect both children's outcomes and practitioner's own professional satisfaction (OECD, 2011).

Continuing professional development is vital to equip practitioners to work effectively within changing educational systems (Wood et al., 2017). Learning is a social process, both for adults and for young children. Practitioners benefit from active engagement with their colleagues in their early years setting, building shared understandings of effective teaching and learning (Wenger, 1998).

Ongoing learning, reflection, collaboration, and contribution to action research, all provide opportunities to share ideas with colleagues to improve practice (Elfer and Dearnley, 2007; Clarke et al. 2006).

### 5 Implement effective planning, teaching, learning and assessment practice

The many decisions that early years practitioners make on a daily basis affect young children's experience of learning. These include all elements of the discover - decide - do cycle. Informed practitioners understand that well planned play-based, child-centred and developmentally appropriate learning activities engage young learners (Callanan et al, 2017; Colliver, 2019; Li, 2020; Zosh et al., 2018).



Practitioners will choose the most effective strategies for individual children and contexts. This would include the use of open-ended resources to offer stimulating opportunities for children's active participation (Drew and Rankin, 2004). Practitioners' early years pedagogy should include both child-initiated and adult-led practice (Sylva et al 2011). Children build their understanding of the world through child-initiated experience of their environment, while a gradual move from informal play-based to more formal teaching builds knowledge and skills in new contexts.

Practitioners understand that a language rich environment supports effective communication skills (Littleton et al., 2005). As young children become increasingly digitally literate (Palaiologou 2014), technology offers new dimensions for literacy learning (Wolfe and Flewitt 2010) and social development (Taggart et al. 2015).

Systematic observation is fundamental to authentic and valid assessment of children's development and progress in the early years. It forms the basis of formative evaluation of a child's learning. Observations that are formative, individual and based on accounts of rich learning are highly valuable (Hood and Mitchell 2017) for monitoring progress and planning next steps. Practitioners will be skilled in making observations that form the basis of detailed pedagogical documentation in the early years.

### **Demonstrate innovative and effective early years practice**

Well-balanced curricula provide opportunities for dynamic working practices where children choose what to explore and talk about, and where practitioners support learning through play-based, responsive teaching (Wood and Hedges 2016). Children thrive when practitioners work together to support well-planned experiences, which build on their ideas and channel their enthusiasm (Clarke et al.). Practitioners also benefit from working collaboratively with colleagues

Learning through play builds children's development and well-being (Wood and Hedges 2016) in quality continuous provision. In an early years' environment where children's interests are evident in play, there is potential to further strengthen curriculum and pedagogical decisions (Wood and Chesworth 2017). Practitioners can find productive starting points from children's interactions with places, materials and living things in the physical and cultural world around them (Blaise et al.) and then build upon them.

Effective learners have strong metacognitive skills. Practitioners extend young children's thinking through problem solving and self-reflection (Whitebread et al., 2009). Effective teaching nurtures the incredible potential of young children through creative approaches to provision (Chappell et al. 2008; Eisner, 2004). The effective practitioner places the children at the heart of their imaginative curriculum decisions and innovative pedagogy.



### **7 Create and maintain a safe and inclusive learning environment**

Education is based on relationships (Malaguzzi 1993). A carefully managed early years setting provides a community that enables children to participate as active citizens and contributors (Harcourt and Einarsdottir, 2011). Children's agency is fundamental to how they safely encounter, organise and develop their play, peers and materials in the world (Wood and Chesworth 2017).

Practitioners will acquire an understanding of children's social and emotional development and its impact on learning. Children's early emotions have an impact upon their behaviour (Rose and Gilbert, 2017), self-regulation (Higgins et al. 2016; Whitebread et al 2009), relationships (Degotardi nd), and motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2008).

### **8 Engage professionally with parents and communities**

Learners and practitioners are part of a wider web of relationships which includes the children and their families. Learning environments are created by all colleagues in the early years setting and the wider community (Sylva et al 2004). In this context practitioners develop their identity and their own learning as early years professionals (Murray, 2013).

Practitioners will provide a range of playful and engaging adult-led activities as well as structured teaching. This helps children towards their transition to more formal learning. Practitioners support children to take an active role in bringing their learning, ideas and interests into their new classrooms (Huf, 2013) and beyond.

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