



Sue Cowley: Together with your child **Learning together**

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COVID-19

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Apart from parents who are key workers, most of us will be looking after our children at home for at least the next few

months.

Parents and caregivers will want to try to maintain learning for their children, and also keep them occupied, while potentially balancing this with working from home themselves.

Children are very resilient and at the moment, the key focus for everyone is wellbeing. Although many people have worries about how this crisis will affect them financially, on a positive note, it does mean that we get to spend quality time with our children.

Children in this age group learn lots simply by being in the company of attentive, loving adults. You really do not need to worry that your children are 'losing out' on learning – they will learn lots from being at home with you!

Where should I start?

The most important thing at this difficult time is your children's happiness and wellbeing.

They may have picked up that you are worried about what is happening. They will be aware that 'normal life' is on hold, because their setting or school has closed and they can't go on playdates with their friends.

In terms of the virus, remember that not talking about something can make children worry about it more. However, don't overload your child with information. Simply talk through any questions that they have as they arise, in an age-appropriate way. Reassure your child by explaining to them that children seem much less vulnerable to the virus.

Play is central

Play is the most important tool for learning in this age group. Simply playing and talking with your child will support all aspects of their learning and help to keep them happy. When playing, let your child take the lead – tune into what they are doing and saying and build on that, rather than ‘directing’ them too much about what you think they should be learning. Notice what they are interested in, and aim to follow on from that.

A daily routine will help you and your child to feel more secure, but remember that this doesn’t have to look like your normal working day, nor does it need to follow the same pattern as your usual childcare setting. A good idea is to decide how much time you will allocate to different activities each day, and then to tick them off as you do them. This helps you feel a sense of achievement.



EYFS, subjects and learning

The EYFS 'prime areas' are key to learning and development for children in this age range – these prime areas are physical development, personal, social and emotional development, and communication and language. In the EYFS, learning doesn't sit neatly under different 'subject areas' like it does in school.

Rather than thinking about lessons or subjects, consider how a single activity could promote learning in many areas. You can find ideas for learning in all kinds of places, even in the everyday household tasks that have to be done.

For instance, you could have great fun doing 'water play' by letting your child help with the washing up. This single activity can support all kinds of learning, from developing language as you chat together while you work, to building grip strength as you squeeze out the washcloths (this will help to prepare your child for mark making/handwriting).

Physical Development

Children in this age group should be as active as possible while they are awake. Make it part of your daily routine to do some form of physical exercise, whether this is joining in with an online exercise class, such as '[PE with Joe](#)', or getting out into a garden to do some digging together.

Aim to get outside into the fresh air once a day for a walk or to play. Regular periods outdoors are very important for healthy development, because sunshine can boost your child's Vitamin D levels.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Although we have to be physically distant from each other, we can still stay in touch with friends and family in other ways. In fact, social contact is going to be even more important over the next weeks and months.

A lovely way to ensure social contact for your young child is to make time for them to chat regularly to relatives on the telephone or via a video conferencing app. As well as supporting your child's social development, this will also be great for boosting their language skills.



Communication and Language

One of the key approaches to help you build your child's communication and language is what is referred to in the early years as 'serve and return' conversations, where you build on each other's ideas.

A great way to start a 'serve and return' conversation with your child is to ask an open-ended question when you are playing together. You might say something like: "That looks interesting, what are you doing?" or "That looks exciting, can I join in?"

As you talk together with your child, aim to use open rather than closed questions – this means using questions that have more than one answer, rather than questions that have a single 'correct' response. For instance, you could ask your child "What do you notice about ...?" or "What do you think will happen if we ...?".

Maths

Maths is everywhere in the world around us, so take advantage of this to incorporate maths throughout your daily routine. You could count the plates, knives and forks as you lay the table, count how many blocks high you can build a tower, or measure what 'two metres apart' looks like to support your child in understanding what 'social distancing' means.

Literacy

One of the worries that parents might have is that the closures could have an impact on their children in terms of the process of learning to read. It is useful to bear in mind that, in most of the world, children do not start formally learning to read until they are six or seven years old. It is also useful to remember that your child will now be spending much more time learning one-on-one, whereas in a childcare setting or a Reception class they would be within a much higher ratio of children to adults.

The single best thing you can do for your child to support their continued literacy learning is to read with them as often as you possibly can. Remember that reading doesn't just have to be about story books – read non-fiction to your child as well.

If you want to understand more about the process of learning to read, and how the skill develops through the first five years of a child's life, a useful starting point is 'Letters and Sounds'. This is a reading programme originally put together by the Department for Education and Skills. Phase One of Letters and Sounds gives you lots of ideas for fun activities that you might do each day with your child, to develop their phonological awareness in preparation for learning to read.



Understanding of the World

For young children, there is so much new in the world around them. Look to nature for inspiration – spot mini beasts together, talk to your child about the names of different birds, get a field

guide and go out looking for wildlife, wildflowers and trees.

For some close-up examination of mini beasts, you could make a small 'mini beast adventure park' in a recycled container. Put in some soil, twigs and leaves, and then add woodlice, worms and other critters so that you can study them up close. Remember to let them go at the end of the day!

Above all else, take the opportunity to enjoy the time you spend with your child, and enjoy the chance to learn together.



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