Time to take action

Educational psychologist **Julia Dunlop** looks at ways of promoting the development of young children with additional needs...

In the last issue, I outlined ways in which children's additional needs may be identified; this time I want to discuss the issues around early intervention. Every early years setting is expected to offer a differentiated curriculum as part of the 'Graduated Response' to special educational needs. Through this, settings take account of the different rates of progress and the individual learning styles of each young child by modifying activities, resources and the environment.

Despite being offered this differentiated curriculum, some children don't make the expected amount of progress. These children then need to benefit from action which the Revised SEN Code of Practice (2002) describes as "additional to or different from" that available to other children. At this point the setting's Special Needs Coordinator (SENCO), having consulted with parents, would place a child at the Early Years Action stage. (The role of the SENCO and the issues around working collaboratively with parents will be covered in later articles.)

The Play Plan

When a child is considered to be at Early Years Action, there's a need to draw up an Individual Education Plan (IEP), sometimes also called a Play Plan. This plan outlines targets which the child will be helped to achieve and lists the strategies to be employed. It should be brief, focused, action-based, manageable, easy to use and involve on-going monitoring and regular reviews. The Play Plan acknowledges the child's existing skill level – what they 'can do'. This 'baseline' is established through observation over a period of time.

Two or three priority areas for development are identified – and described in clear, unambiguous language. For example, rather than saying, "Ella will improve her attention skills", it's clearer to say, "Ella will engage for two minutes on a task chosen for her". With this level of clarity it's easier to see whether or not the goal has been achieved.

The learning hierarchy

During the 1970s, American psychologists Haring and Liberty, proponents of 'Precision Teaching', described a hierarchy of stages involved in the learning process. These stages are important to consider when planning an intervention programme for a young child with additional needs.

1. Acquisition

This is the earliest level, where a child still has to learn the basic requirements of a skill – for example, beginning to sort items into two sets according to their colour.

Acquisition is promoted by good teaching, using demonstration and graded prompts.

2. Fluency

The child learns to perform the skill smoothly and at a natural rate. In the colour sorting example, the child can now perform this on every occasion, without error.

Fluency is enhanced when the child is given multiple and repeated opportunities to practise the skill, together with individual encouragement for each attempt.

3. Maintenance

Continuing to be able to perform the skill – even after instruction stops. So when the colour sorting task is brought out after a week in the cupboard, the child can still do it fluently.

Here opportunities for over-learning are important so that the skill becomes automatic.

4. Generalisation

Being able to demonstrate the skill across a range of situations. Now the child can sort

into two colour sets, no matter what items are used.

This is supported when a variety of materials are used early in the teaching process and where the skill is taught in the natural context.

5. Adaptation

We can be sure that a child's skill is truly mastered and embedded when it can be applied and even modified to fit each set of circumstances. For example, if the child had been taught to sort red from yellow, they can now adapt the skill to sort a group of blue and green items.

Although 'continuous provision' and 'following the child's interests' are currently fashionable in early years practice, there's still a role for direct instruction – particularly when there are concerns about a child's developmental progress. It's easy to think that once a child has acquired a skill we can move on and teach the next one – but the skill may not have been mastered.

Considering environmental changes

All too often, when there are concerns about a child's development, the focus falls only on the child – as if the 'problem'

Small steps

BREAKING DOWN SKILLS INTO EASY-TO-MASTER CHUNKS CAN AID CHILDREN'S PROGRESS...

Central to any direct instruction programme is the need to break a skill down into its component parts. This is known as Task Analysis. For example, the skill of eating rice pudding with a spoon would break down like this:

1. **Reach out and pick up the spoon**
2. **Dip the spoon into the pudding**
3. **Pick up some pudding with the spoon**
4. **Lift the spoon towards the mouth**
5. **Open the mouth**
6. **Put spoon into mouth**
7. **Use mouth to take pudding from spoon**

When teaching each step, it's not necessary to teach them in chronological order. Success is more likely if easier steps are tackled first. In the above example, Step 3 is probably the most difficult and would be taught last. Steps 1, 5 and 7 are the easiest, so could be tackled first.

Prompts are used to help a child learn the steps within a skill. Physical prompts, perhaps guiding the child's hand, are the strongest prompts. Next in strength are gestural prompts – where an action is mimed. Finally come verbal prompts, the weakest of all, where a spoken instruction is given.

If the child gets 'stuck' on any step in a chain, then that step itself may need breaking down into even smaller elements.

is within them. But it's vital that early years practitioners take time to assess any environmental factors which could be impeding the child's progress. The following examples illustrate how small changes to the environment can have a big impact on a child's learning or behaviour:

1 Sam's key worker was concerned that he spent lots of time running the whole length of the pre-school room and little time looking at other activities. The Area SENCO noticed that the layout of the room left a long, wide, furniture-free channel. This space was cueing Sam to run up and down. By moving some shelf units and tables, the temptation was removed and Sam began to explore other options.

2 Millie always wandered away at story time and often wasn't alone in this. The supervisor and key worker made some observations. Realising that story time had become a 'filler' activity whilst preparations were made for lunchtime, they made some changes. Group sizes were reduced. Large format books with illustrations which everyone could see were chosen. Where possible, puppets or props were used to help tell the story. Millie not only engaged with story time, but began to use the puppets to retell the story to her doll.

3 Latif used to get confused and distressed at tidy-up time. The advisory teacher noticed that he got very involved in his play and the instruction to tidy-up came 'out of the blue' to him. A simple picture timetable was introduced so that he could see what activity came after tidy-up. An auditory signal was also introduced – playing a particular music track cued all the children into making the transition from play to carpet time. It also reduced the need for the adults to call out, "Tidy-up time!"

Why intervene?

Some may ask why specific, targeted intervention is needed at all if a setting is providing a rich, stimulating environment. In many instances, a child's development will shoot forward again after a period at a standstill – but this cannot be guaranteed.

When a child's individual learning needs are met this can have a long-term positive impact in the following ways:

- The gap between this child and their peers is likely to narrow
- The child is less likely to become aware that other children have skills which they lack
- Their self-esteem will remain high and they'll be a confident child
- They will be willing to attempt new activities without fearing failure
- The child will have more chance of realising their potential

Case Study: Sophie (age 3 years)

Sophie, the youngest of four children, has just started in nursery. Her mother has had concerns about her development for over a year and the Health Visitor has referred her to the local Child Development Centre for assessment. Her language is delayed and her basic skills are immature.

Her intervention plan, designed in consultation with her parents, included the following elements:

- Supporting her understanding of language by using objects or pictures to flesh out verbal instructions or questions.
- Promoting her expressive language by commenting on what she's doing as she plays and leaving gaps for her to comment too.
- Encouraging her emerging social interaction skills by setting up simple turn-taking games with one other child.
- Specific teaching of bathroom and mealtime routines – step by step after task analysis.
- Direct teaching of early learning skills, for example, colour matching.
- Sophie soon settled into nursery and her skills began to blossom.

findoutmore

Julia Dunlop was, for 12 years, a senior educational psychologist and early years specialist. In the next issue of *TN*, Julia will look at the role of the SEN coordinator in early years settings.