

Theories of child development

A practice guide to help you understand theories of child development and their influence on early years practice

Supporting members to provide the highest standards of care and learning for children

This practice guide has been developed for all childcare professionals including childminders, nursery workers and nannies

This guide covers:

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1. Introduction

In this practice guide, we'll be exploring how theories of child development have influenced early years practice over the years.

As you consider and reflect on your own childcare practice, it is useful to have an understanding of these theories which will help to inform developmentally appropriate practice. They will also contribute to your understanding of certain behaviours and how children learn.

As well as considering each of the theories, we will also look at how each is reflected in or has influenced practice in early years settings.

2. Importance of theories of development

The theories that we will consider in this practice guide have been developed from observational research. In the most part the theorist has made an attempt to explain certain aspects of child development. A *theory* is an explanatory framework which is then either built upon and expanded or in some cases discredited by further research. Some aspects of science such as neuroscience can also be used to support certain theories.

As with all ways of working, those that put forward the theories have done so from a specific background of values and beliefs. You might want to consider the following as you read about the different theories:

1. Nature v nurture – are we biologically or genetically pre-programmed or are we influenced by our environment? Or is our development defined by a combination of the two?
2. Is development universal or diverse – do we all need to have the same kind of experiences in order to develop or will a diversity of experiences result in the same development?
3. Is the child an active or passive participant in their own development?
4. Does development take place in periods of sudden growth or is it a more gradual process whereby skills are built upon?

It is also important to recognise that no one theory can fully explain all aspects of development, some focus on cognitive development whilst others are more about social and emotional development. It is important to develop our understanding of children's behaviour, reactions and ways of learning through taking an eclectic approach to theory along with additional research as well as cultural influences.

Overall our understanding of theory is very important in the planning and delivery of developmentally appropriate practice and to support the implementation of evidence based practice.

In this practice guide, we outline some of the more well-known theories of child development in order to further your own understanding of how children learn and develop. We have also included some suggestions of how each theory might be shown or affect practice.

3. **Constructivist theory**

Jean Piaget (1896 – 1980)

Piaget was a 'constructivist' which means that his theory was based on the belief that children 'construct' their thoughts and understanding of the world based on their experiences. He saw learning as an ongoing process where children made use of what he called 'schema' to construct their learning.

This is a four part process:

1. **Assimilation** – children construct a schema about their world based on their current experiences. (A four legged furry animal is called a cat)
2. **Equilibrium** – this schema fits with the child's current experience and everything is in balance (the child points to the cat in the house and the parent says cat)
3. **Disequilibrium** – an experience occurs which changes or challenges the current schema (on a visit to a friends house the child experiences a four legged furry animal called a dog)
4. **Accommodation** – the child changes the original schema to include the new information (different four legged furry animals exist, some are cats and some are dogs)

Piaget also thought that children go through four developmental stages which take them from birth to maturity:

Sensori – motor stage (birth to 18/24 months)

During this stage the baby is experiencing the immediate environment and the effect that they can have on it. During this time the child will develop an understanding of 'object permanence', the fact that something still exists even if you cannot see it. (There are links here to attachment theory which you will read about in section 9). They will also start to use symbolic language.

Pre-operational stage (18/24 months–7 years)

Young children are using symbols in their thought, speech and play. At this stage children are very ego-centric, they believe that the world revolves around them and their needs and find it difficult to see the view of others.

Piaget's research also found that children of this age are unable to conserve – to understand that just because one child has a drink in a tall thin glass and the other has a drink in a short wide glass doesn't mean that the first child has more. They will think this even if they see the adult start with two drinks in the same glass filled to the same level.



Concrete-operational stage (7–11 years)

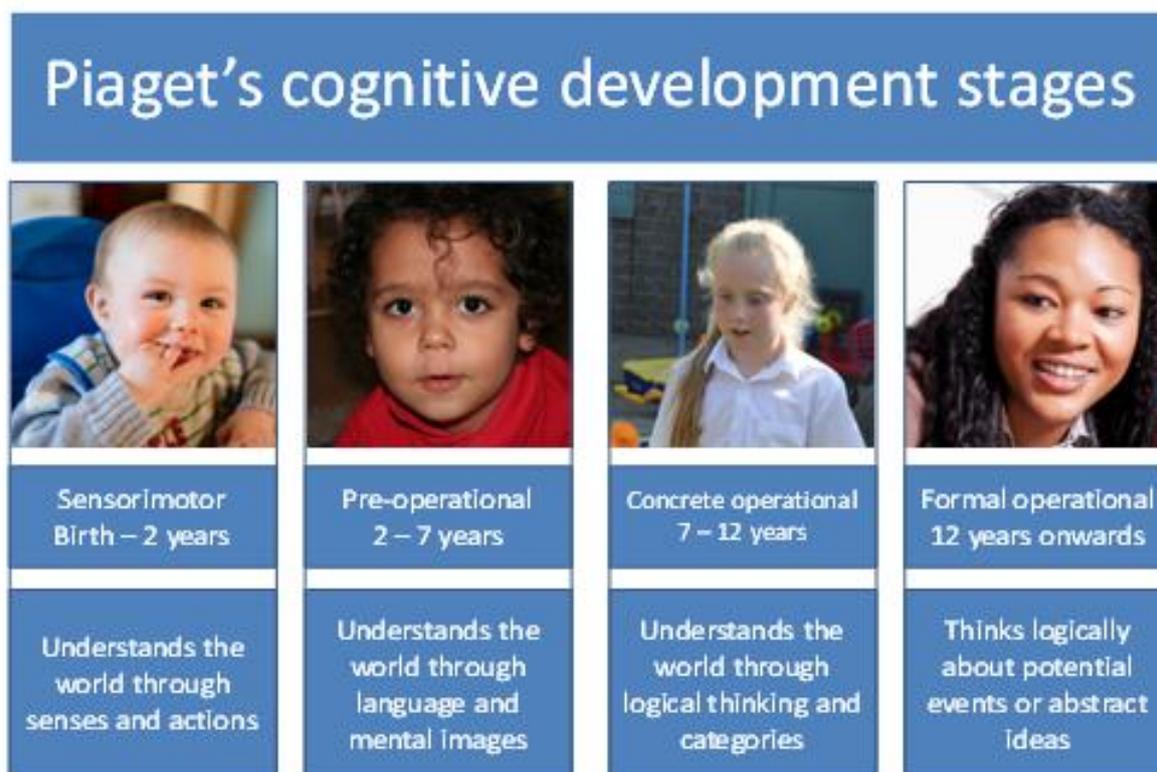
Children are now able to understand the concept of conservation. They can also solve problems but will normally need to use props or objects in order to support their thinking.

Formal operational stage (11–adult)

Now capable of abstract thinking and can consider situations and problems that they have not directly experienced. The ability to think through more complex logic, mathematical and scientific concepts becomes more developed. Some young people with special education needs or disability may never reach this stage of development Piaget saw development happening in advance of the learning, as the child reaches each new stage of development the number and complexity of the schema will change. It is also important to understand that Piaget saw children's thinking as different to that of adults and so therefore they will learn in different ways

In practice

Piaget's theory has had an influence on the current EYFS (England) and Foundation Phase (Wales), in particular the understanding that children learn best when they are actively exploring a stimulating and challenging environment. Children are active in the construction of their own



learning and they need opportunity to play and discover.

England

EYFS 1.9 - In planning and guiding children's activities, practitioners must reflect on the different ways that children learn and reflect these in their practice.

Wales

The practitioner can develop children's thinking across the curriculum through the processes of planning, developing and reflecting, which helps them acquire deeper understanding and enables them to explore and make sense of their world.

(Foundation Phase-Learning and Teaching Pedagogy, Welsh Government 2008)

Piaget's theory also influences the characteristics of effective teaching and learning which are:

Playing and exploring	children investigate and experience things, and 'have a go'
Active learning	children concentrate and keep on trying if they encounter difficulties, and enjoy achievements
Creating and thinking critically	children have and develop their own ideas, make links between ideas, and develop strategies for doing things.

It has also influenced thinking around the concept of 'readiness' and that children need to reach a certain level of cognitive development before being expected to understand particular concepts. This has been taken into consideration within the EYFS in England, children develop in the prime areas first which form the basis for successful learning in the specific areas.

England

EYFS 1.6 - Practitioners working with the youngest children are expected to focus strongly on the three prime areas, which are the basis for successful learning in the other four specific areas. The three prime areas reflect the key skills and capacities all children need to develop and learn effectively, and become ready for school.

Observations are important here too as it helps us to understand each child's level of achievement, interests and learning styles and then provide suitable learning opportunities.

Wales

In the Foundation Phase by observing children while they are involved in activities, practitioners will find out how the children's skills are developing and what they are able to do. Practitioners will also be able to gather information on what the children know and understand, as well as their personal preferences (Observing Children, 2008)

Piaget's theory can also help our understanding of children's behaviour, the inability to conserve, for example, could lead to arguments over sharing or the amount of drink one child has compared to another.

4.Social Constructivist theory

Lev Vygotsky (1896 – 1934)

Vygotsky also proposed that children constructed their understanding and learning but saw this happening within a socio-cultural context. His theory is based on the idea that language

and cognitive development go hand-in-hand and that through language the children develop their understanding.

The main idea behind Vygotsky's theory is that as a child develops they will reach a point where learning can no longer take place. At this point the child then needs the support of others to move on in their learning, a process known as scaffolding. The child is said to be in a 'zone of proximal development' and the scaffolding process will help them to develop the skills and understanding required to move forwards. The child will then practice and consolidate that learning before more scaffolding is required.

For example Charlie has learnt that he can use a spade in the sandpit to fill his bucket with sand, when playing alongside Tom he sees Tom tip his bucket of sand upside down and then lift it off to reveal a sandcastle. Tom says to Charlie 'look I made a castle', Charlie then tries the same with his bucket, he has to practice a few times but eventually manages to tip the bucket and make a castle.

Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky does not identify a series of stages but more a gradual process of development with each experience building on what has gone before. He also recognises that experience, language and therefore also development will also vary according to the culture that the child is immersed in.

In practice

Vygotsky's theory highlights the social aspect of play, learning and development. It also emphasises the importance of both adult led and child initiated play.

England

EYFS 1.8 – Each area of learning must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child initiated activity.

Wales

Personal and Social Development, Well-being and Cultural Diversity is at the heart of the Foundation Phase and children's skills are developed across all Areas of Learning through participation in experiential learning activities indoors and outdoors. Children learn about themselves, their relationships with other children and adults both within and beyond the family.

(Foundation Phase Framework, 2015)

Adults need to be observant of children's play and development and know when to step in to scaffold the learning. Adults can work alongside the children in order to extend and challenge their learning.

Vygotsky also recognised the important role that our peers may also play in scaffolding learning – a group of children playing together will include a range of ages and abilities and some children will be supporting the development of others.

If the children encounter a problem then there may be some discussion amongst them as to how best solve it, ideas will be put forwards and tested until eventually they come up with a solution that works for them. Like Piaget, Vygotsky's theory also promotes learning through stimulating and challenging play but alongside others.

5. Behaviourist theory

B.F. Skinner (1904–1990)

Skinner developed a behaviourist approach known as operant conditioning where learning is influenced by rewards, punishments and environmental factors. His idea was that children learn to behave in certain ways because of previous experiences which have either been pleasant or unpleasant. He saw children as active participants in this process, exploring their environment and then learning from the consequences of their behaviour.

Skinner identified three groups of operants or consequences:

Positive reinforcers

The behaviour is rewarded by something that the child finds pleasant or enjoyable. This could be the adult giving praise for an achievement or a sticker on a chart for using the potty.

Negative reinforcers

A behaviour is stopped or reduced because it causes pain, discomfort or upset. A child who touches something which is very hot will try not to repeat the experience as they have learnt that it hurts.

Punishment

This is the application of an unpleasant stimulus or the removal of a potential reward. For example, removing a teenager's mobile phone from them after they did not tidy their room.

In practice

Skinner's study showed that for the best results reinforcement needs to be immediate, unexpected and consistent. As far as possible it should also be positive. One of the best forms of positive reinforcement to use in the early years setting, is immediate feedback on performance, this lets the child know what they have done well and shows that you value their efforts.

England

EYFS 1.5 - Personal, social and emotional development involves helping children to:

- develop a positive sense of themselves, and others
- to form positive relationships and develop respect for others
- to develop social skills and learn how to manage their feelings
- to understand appropriate behaviour in groups
- to have confidence in their own abilities

Wales

The Personal and Social development, Well-being and Cultural Diversity area of learning states that children should:

- develop an understanding of the behavioural expectations of the setting/school
- understand that rules are essential in an ordered community
- understand the relationship between feelings and actions and that other people have feelings and value and contribute to their own well-being and to the well-being of others

(Foundation Phase Framework, 2015)

By unexpected it means that the child should not be performing actions or behaviours just for the praise. Some children may display challenging behaviour in order to get attention – this is also a positive reinforcer so you need to be aware that this is happening and try to ensure that you only give attention for good behaviour.

Stickers are another way of providing positive reinforcements and can be given to reward behaviours such as sharing, using the potty and holding hands when out walking. It is important that the child knows why they are being given the sticker and that it holds meaning for them in order to encourage the wanted behaviour. For some children their age or level of understanding means that stickers are of less value, a baby, for example will be happy with a cuddle.

All forms of reinforcement need to be age appropriate and meaningful to have the desired affect.

6. Social learning theory

Albert Bandura (1925-)

Working in the 1960's Bandura conducted a study using an experiment known as the 'Bobo doll experiment', this appeared to show that when shown aggressive behaviour towards a doll with no consequence then children will imitate that behaviour.

Bandura used this study to develop his social learning theory which is based on the idea that children learn from their environment through an active cognitive process of observational learning.

Although there are accepted limitations with the original study (including the question of ethics), it is generally acknowledged that, to a point, children will attend to and imitate the behaviour of those they observe.

A good example of this is teenagers copying the look/fashion/dance moves of celebrities that they like. Adults will respond to that behaviour in either a positive or negative manner. Children will then learn, through the social environment in which they live, what are acceptable forms of behaviour.

Although based on behaviour, Bandura himself describes his theory as a form of 'social cognitivism' – the child will only imitate the behaviour or activity if the cognitive development is in place to support it. The child has to be able to notice the activity, remember it and then replicate it.

In practice

Children will learn from those around them including both other children and also the adults in their lives. It is important in the early years setting to provide children with good role models to show how to behave in a variety of situations.

England

EYFS 1.11. A quality learning experience for children requires a quality workforce. A well-qualified, skilled staff strongly increases the potential of any individual setting to deliver the best possible outcomes for children.

Wales

Central to the Foundation Phase approach is the practitioner as a facilitator of learning, with the child at the heart of learning and teaching. Care should be taken to ensure that the teaching approach used is based on the needs of the child in each Area of Learning and development.

(Learning and Teaching Pedagogy, 2008)

From this children will learn how to share, remember their manners and to be helpful. According to social learning theory children learn from imitating others rather than by being taught or shown. An example of this could be learning to cross the road. If everytime you cross the road with the children you find a safe place to cross, stop, look and listen and then walk across carefully when there is no traffic, they will learn this by imitation.

7. Psychoanalytical theory

Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939)

Freud's theory of personality development is often used to explain unconscious thoughts and actions. Freud suggested that our mind or personality is made up of three parts:

- the Id
- the Ego
- the Super-ego.

Id

Present at birth, it enables the baby to survive through a set of instincts. There is no consideration of the effect on others when getting their needs met. A baby will cry when hungry and only stop when it gets fed regardless of how tired the mother is. This is known as gratification.

Ego

Develops from the Id in the first few months of a child's life. The Ego encourages a more socially acceptable way of getting the demands of the Id met. A young child will begin to understand the concept of eating at meal times – this is known as deferred gratification.

Super-ego

Develops during childhood. This aspect can also be thought of comprising of the conscience, pride and confidence. The child may feel guilt if they have broken a rule or behaved in an unacceptable manner.

When things go wrong there is inner conflict between the Ego and the Super-ego. The child might try to deal with this by using defense mechanisms such as denial, repression or displacement.

In practice

Although Freud's work has not stood up to scientific scrutiny, his ideas can help to go some way towards explaining and understanding unconscious behaviour. Firstly if you are caring for babies, it will help understanding that they cry because they have needs to be met. As children develop we can have greater expectations of them in terms of waiting for meals, toilet training or behaving in a polite manner. It can also help us to see defense mechanisms in action such as the 'it wasn't me' response when something gets broken.

8. Humanist theory

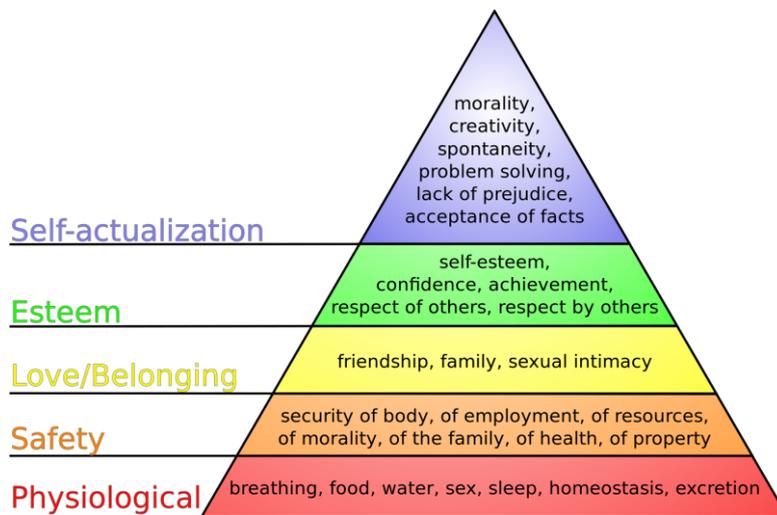
Abraham Maslow (1908 – 1970)

Maslow was interested in what motivates people, in developing his theory he proposed that people are motivated to achieve certain needs. He saw these as occurring in a hierarchy and proposed that each level needs to be fulfilled before a person could move onto the next. The final level, of self-actualisation, was not a single goal but rather an experience and that a person is in a constant process of 'becoming'.

If a child's basic needs of food, warmth, sleep, love and security are not being met then they will not grow and develop.

In practice

In early years settings we need to be aware of how basic needs are provided for the children in our care. The safeguarding and welfare requirements of the EYFS in England and the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare in Wales ensure that we provide the physiological and safety needs described by Maslow



England

EYFS 3.1 - Children learn best when they are healthy, safe and secure, when their individual needs are met, and when they have positive relationships with the adults caring for them.

Wales

Children's disposition to learn is affected by their feelings; for example, if a child is happy, well nourished, contented and relaxed the effect on learning will be positive.

(Learning and Teaching Pedagogy, 2008)

The use of a Key person within the setting will ensure that the child feels safe and secure. Once all this is in place the child can then move towards the top of the pyramid and develop esteem – this is supported by the overall ethos and values of the setting.

For some children, however, their basic needs are not being met in the home and may become a child protection issue. Consider how you could support the parents in your setting perhaps by providing breakfast or other meals, you could keep a supply of additional outdoor clothing or you could signpost the parents to support groups or other agencies.

9. Attachment theory

John Bowlby (1907 – 1990)

Bowlby's research in the 1950s led him to the understanding that the mental health of children could be linked to a separation from their primary carer. He identified that a child is attached to the mother, not just because she feeds it, but also to support their social, emotional and cognitive development. He proposed that attachment needs to be understood within an evolutionary context – when a child is upset, hurt or threatened then they will seek proximity to the attachment figure, in evolutionary terms this would enhance their chances of survival.

It is recognised that attachment develops through a series of stages:

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| 0-3 months | Babies are attracted to human faces and voices. |
| 3-7 months | Babies form indiscriminate attachments. They show obvious pleasure when recognising a familiar voice or face but they are also happy to be in the company of strangers. |
| 7-8 months | Babies form specific attachments. The baby will show a preference for specific key people and will show distress if they leave the room (separation anxiety). The baby may also be upset by or fearful of the close proximity of strangers (stranger fear). |
| 9 months onwards | Baby will form multiple attachments. The baby will become more independent and form multiple healthy attachments. |

Good healthy attachments are most likely to form when the caregiver is responsive to the babies needs and signals. The quality of these emotional ties will shape the child's ability to form healthy relationships later in life.

In practice

The Childminder, nanny or key person will become an important secondary attachment in the child's life. Part of your role when the child starts at the setting may be to explain the importance of this to the parent so that they do not feel threatened and that the child will no longer seek out their care and attention.

A healthy child will establish strong bonds with a number of key care givers in their lives including parents, grandparents, older siblings and early years workers. If possible the key person in the setting should remain the same for that child for as long the structure of the setting allows. It is important to consider staff retention in the setting as a high turnover of staff may impact on the development of these key attachments.

England

EYFS 3.27 - Each child must be assigned a key person. Their role is to help ensure that every child's care is tailored to meet their individual needs, to help the child become familiar with the setting, offer a settled relationship for the child and build a relationship with their parents.

Wales

Standard 14.5 of The National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to 12 years of age states 'Every child is allocated to a member of staff who is their key worker. The key worker is mainly responsible for their well-being on a daily basis and ensures that information about the child is exchanged with the parent'.

For some parents, illness of either them or the child may have an impact on attachment. Consider how you might support a parent with post-natal depression which may affect her ability to recognise and respond to the signals that her baby is giving.

10. What do theories mean for practice

At the beginning of this practice guide we mentioned that no one theory can explain all areas of child development. It is important in practice to acknowledge the contribution of all theories and to implement a number of principles that guide early years education.

These principles have been encompassed within both the EYFS in England and the Foundation Phase for Wales. Current research is supporting this further and this evidence based practice enables the provision of quality early years education.

Here are some of the principles to remember when organising your settings and planning for learning and development:

1. Development of children is holistic, areas of learning are interconnected
2. Skills are developed by building on previous learning and experiences
3. Development occurs in a sequence, the rate will vary according to the individual child
4. Development occurs in, and is influenced by social and cultural context
5. Children are active learners, they need to explore, experiment and experience their worlds
6. Children need to grow up in language rich environments
7. Children learn through play, they have an innate desire to play, they have a right to play
8. Both nature and nurture contribute to a child's development. Biological maturation must take place in order to support cognitive development.
9. Children need to be given opportunities to acquire skills, to practice skills and to challenge themselves
10. Children's basic needs must be met in order that they can be motivated to reach their full potential
11. Children need to operate from the basis of secure and healthy attachments.

11. Links to PACEY Professional Standards

Here are the areas of professional standards that this practice guide relates to. Remember reading practice guides can count towards your continuous professional development (CPD) and can support you in reflecting and completing the professional standards audit tool.

PACEY Professional standards

Member

Researching and thinking about different theories of child development will help you meet the standard **P1.1 Reflect on and develop my practice** by evaluating and trying to improve your practice, knowing where to get up-to-date information, and keeping a log of personal development.

Affiliate

Continuously reflecting on your practice, by thinking about and evaluating theories of child development and how they influence current practice will help you meet the standard **P1.2 Reflect on and develop my practice**.

Fellow

Critically evaluating your performance and the thinking behind your approach to child development and actively seeking out and testing approaches to learning, techniques and ideas to improve the quality of your childcare practice and work with parents and carers will help you meet the standard **P4.3 Use evaluation to improve the quality of my childcare practice and work with parents and carers**.

12. Resources

Websites and organisations

www.simplypsychology.org

Books and publications

Observing Children. Welsh Government 2008

Learning and Teaching Pedagogy. Welsh Government 2008.

Birth to 5 – Child development Progress *Mary Sheridan*

Child development theory and Practice 0-11 *Jonathan Doherty* 2013

Children's minds *Margaret Donaldson* 1986

Understanding Child development - 0-8 Linking theory and practice Jennie Lindon
2012

How children think and learn From Montessori – Vygotsky - Linda Pound

Child development: a skilful communicator, a competent learner (A unique child)
Linda Pound 2015

Enhancing early attachments – Lisa Berlin and Yair Ziv

Child development – an illustrated handbook – Jacqueline Harding 2013

13. Frameworks and Legislation

England

Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, Department for Education (2014)

Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

Wales

Foundation Phase Framework, Welsh Government (2015)

National Minimum Standards for Regulated Child Care for children up to 12 years of age,
Welsh Government (2016)

14. Support from PACEY

As a PACEY member you can get more help by visiting the website www.pacey.org.uk or by calling 0300 003 0005.

PACEY is the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years. A standard-setting organisation, we promote best practice and support childcare professionals to deliver high standards of care and learning.

Since 1977 we have provided high quality support to our members and have worked with government, local authorities and others to raise standards.

Together with our members - childminders, nannies and nursery workers - we are working to become the professional association for everyone in childcare and early years and ensure our members are recognised for the vital role they play in helping children get the best start in life.

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