

The Revised Early Learning Goals: The Specific Areas

There is a great deal of argument about the merits and shortcomings of the revised Early Learning Goals (ELGs) which become statutory in September 2021, but ultimately, practitioners will have to implement them and do their utmost to support positive learning experiences for all children. The intention here, is not to argue the merits of the revisions but to explain *what* the main changes are and *how* practitioners might use them for the benefit of the children they support. The second in a three-part series on the changes, this article focuses on the specific areas of learning and aims to provide a practical guide to their implementation.

Literacy

The Educational Programme

The importance of children developing a 'lifelong love' of reading is foregrounded. This reflects a more ambitious aim than the previous one of 'igniting children's interest'. Specific skills involved in reading and writing are identified: comprehension and 'word reading' for reading; spelling, handwriting and composition for writing.

The expectations here, acknowledge that whilst literacy begins at birth, some aspects will be taught later. This is important, as although the list of skills may act as a temptation to focus on children skills rather than children's needs, closer scrutiny provides a rationale for the latter. The need for talking, enjoyment, singing and the articulation of children's ideas demonstrates a recognition that the foundations of literacy are underpinned by pleasurable and satisfying interactions and activities.

The new ELGs

The previous two ELGs (reading and writing) become three as comprehension is specified separately.

Comprehension

Children *demonstrating* understanding is retained from the previous reading ELG but rather than children talking about what *they* have read as evidence of understanding, children understanding what has been read *to them* is specified. This shifts the focus to practitioners

introducing new vocabulary to older children and supporting their processing through discussion. Practitioners can check for understanding by observing whether children can anticipate events in stories and apply new vocabulary in other contexts. It also highlights the need for reading books to younger children.

Reading

This ELG focuses on phonics and specifies knowledge of at least ten digraphs and phonemes for each letter of the alphabet by the end of the EYFS. Whilst this is prescriptive and outcome-focused, there are arguably, a more child-centred change. The previous expectation for reading aloud with *accuracy* is amended to reading aloud texts *consistent with phonic knowledge*. This reflects the need for practitioners to focus upon sensitively supporting children's attempts to apply their phonic knowledge rather than emphasising accuracy.

Writing

A new element of this ELG is correct letter formation. What constitutes 'correct' is unspecified, but this provision does highlight the aim for children to develop the foundations of a flowing script. It is important though, to support the development of fine motor skills in a child-centred way, beginning with purposeful mark-making and multisensory, action-based activities. Letter formation links to the expectation that simple phrases and sentences should be legible by the end of the EYFS. However, the previous requirement for 'correct' spelling of some words is replaced by the application of phonic knowledge in writing, evidencing the developing understanding of phoneme /grapheme correspondence. This change can be seen as moving away from writing as the reproduction of text, towards writing as a means of communicating understanding.

Summary of Key Changes

- The new comprehension ELG emphasises reading to children and introducing new and challenging vocabulary that they apply in other contexts
- Children are expected to know the corresponding phonemes for each letter of the alphabet and at least ten digraphs by the end of EYFS
- There is a new emphasis on 'correct' letter formation
- Spelling should focus on the application of phonic knowledge rather than accuracy

Thinking about practice: does your pedagogy:

- focus on the pleasure of engagement with books and stories? Do children have opportunities to engage with a range of texts of their choosing to maintain and develop their motivation as well as skills?
- ensure that children are read to frequently?
- use resources that develop children's gross and fine motor skills which support their increased specificity in their movements, such as ribbons, music and malleable materials?
- avoid labelling children's responses as 'right' or 'wrong'? but instead focus on supporting and gaining insights from their efforts?

Maths**The Educational Programme**

There are two significant changes here: Firstly, the increased emphasis on children acquiring a deep, secure conceptual understanding of numbers to ten and their relationships and patterns. The practice guidance reflects the need for children to use varied concrete resources and materials with which to apply and deepen their understanding. Secondly, and importantly, the affective element of learning is acknowledged by the inclusion of the need for children to develop confidence and feel positive about engaging with Maths and not being afraid to make mistakes.

The new ELGs

Shape, space and measure is no longer a separate ELG but is subsumed by the practice requirements in the educational programme.

Number

The emphasis on numbers to ten in this ELG reflects a focus on depth and secure understanding rather than on accelerated learning.

Numerical Patterns

The language of this new ELG is tightly connected to concepts of patterns including doubling and odd and even. Children should count beyond twenty and recognise patterns in numbers.

At first sight these requirements can be seen as prescriptive and perhaps narrow. However, they offer an opportunity for practitioners to really focus on supporting children's deep understanding of numerical concepts, particularly working in depth on numbers to ten. Coupled with the recognition that children need to develop confidence and a positive attitude to Maths, this justifies and reinforces the need for play-based pedagogy where children use hands-on resources in real-life contexts and that the shift to symbolic resources is appropriate only when this has been achieved.

Summary of Key changes

- Children should be supported in developing and maintaining a positive attitude to Maths
- Children should be supported in developing a *deep* understanding of numbers to ten including subitising.
- Shape, space and measure should form part of holistic provision rather than a separate ELG
- Recognition of patterns in numbers is foregrounded

Thinking about practice: does your pedagogy:

- invite children to rehearse, revisit and reinforce their understanding of number through small world and role play where they can initiate and engage with numerical concepts and spatial reasoning and apply their knowledge in meaningful contexts?
- look for opportunities for children to be intrinsically motivated to apply their mathematical knowledge and recognise patterns such as activities which involve counting, sharing, sorting, comparing, measuring and estimating?

Understanding the World

The Educational Programme

The rationale for UW remains the same; that children need guidance to make sense of their physical world and community. However, new elements are included: *direct* experience of

their community through visits to places of local significance and visits from members of their community is expected. Within the setting, resources and activities should support children's understanding of diversity. For the first time, understanding of ecology is highlighted.

The new ELGs

The concept of time forms a new ELG (Past and Present). This reflects a sharper focus on a conceptual understanding of the past.

Past and Present

This new ELG is clearly designed to establish the foundation of the concept of history and change over time. Children should have opportunities to talk about their understanding and identify similarities and differences between the past and the present.

People Culture and Communities

A significant change here is the requirement for children to know about other cultures and religions in England which reflects a new and specific focus on diversity. In addition, they are expected to 'know about similarities and differences' between life here and in *other* countries, and to *explain* them.

The Natural World

The inclusion of the term 'natural' represents the recognition of the need for children to develop ecological awareness. Children are expected to *explore* the natural world around them rather than just observe it. In their immediate environment, nature is foregrounded and contrasted with non-natural environments and there is an expectation that this should be explicit and supported by practitioners reading appropriate texts to children.

Summary of Key changes

- Technology is no longer represented by its own ELG
- Children should develop a conceptual understanding of the past.
- Children should learn about other cultures and communities, here and abroad and explain similarities and differences
- Exploration of the natural world and its processes represents a new emphasis in UW

Thinking about practice: does your pedagogy

- support children in gaining real-life experience of aspects of the community in which they live through visits and visitors and through the use of books and stories?
- reflect diversity in people, communities and in the natural world?
- Offer children opportunities to explore nature directly and develop awareness of the nature of growth, change and ecology?

Expressive Art and Design

The Educational Programme

Concepts of artistic and cultural awareness and creativity are introduced by the revisions. This represents a shift away from a list of activities to a focus on children's developing dispositions. This highlights the opportunities that EAD offers for learning and development which may be easily overlooked if the arts are viewed as 'soft subjects' the outcomes of which are less easily measurable. Self-expression, vocabulary, appreciation and interpretation link this ELG with the prime areas of learning, representing a holistic approach which aids practitioners in reflecting on provision.

Creating with Materials

The goal of using tools and materials safely remains unchanged but rather than just 'exploring' and 'using' materials, the new ELG introduces the expectation that children will 'create', 'share' and 'explain' their creations to others and apply the use of props and materials in different contexts such as role play.

Being Imaginative and Expressive

The addition of the term 'expressive' to this ELG brings a renewed emphasis on communication of children's own ideas, a feature of the revised ELGs. The concept of representation is developed and extended to include 'invent' and 'adapt' and 'recount' thus foregrounding the recognition that children need to be active and flexible rather than fixed and outcome-focused in their creative endeavours.

Dance is reframed as 'try[ing] to move in time with music', which represents an emphasis on children's innate responses to stimuli rather than a more formal, out-come focus on learning conventional dance moves.

Summary of Key changes

- Creativity is framed in terms of cultural awareness, a recognition that EAD is a social as well as a subjective experience.
- There is a new emphasis on children communicating their creative processes to others

Thinking about practice: does your pedagogy

- enable children to make independent choices and decisions and support experimentation and flexible thinking through the availability of time and space?
- focus on the processes rather than the outcomes of children's endeavours?
- encourage and respect the collaboration of thought, dialogue and the sharing of ideas?
- recognise the value of EAD to children's learning and development by offering a range of open-ended resources to which children can respond in unique ways?