At the very beginning of the review that led to the revised EYFS in 2012 the author, Dame Clare Tickell, tells us: ‘A child's future choices, attainment, wellbeing, happiness and resilience are profoundly affected by the quality of guidance, love and care they receive during their first years’ (Tickell, 2011: 2). To provide this quality we need to start by understanding as much as we can about how children learn and develop. In fact, in the EYFS 2012, this has even been made a statutory requirement!

*In planning and guiding children’s activities practitioners must reflect on the different ways that children learn and reflect these in their practice.* (EYFS, 2012: 1.10)

The EYFS has always highlighted the importance of how as well as what children learn. In the 2008 EYFS this was most obvious in three of the commitments under the theme of Learning and Development: *Play and Exploration, Active Learning* and *Creativity and Critical Thinking*. The Tickell Review in 2011 pledged to strengthen the importance of how children learn as fundamental to effective practice, renaming these three commitments as the ‘Characteristics of Effective Learning’ and giving them greater prominence by devoting a section of the report to them. Although there is little information on them in the revised Statutory Framework, it has been made a requirement for reception teachers to provide information to Year 1 teachers on how each child has been learning in relation to the ‘Characteristics’, as part of the statutory assessment the EYFS Profile.

### 1 The Characteristics of Effective Learning

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In the non-statutory guidance, ‘Development Matters’, each characteristic is divided into three elements to clarify what it involves. With the help of some observations of children learning, playing, doing and thinking, some of the theory underpinning each characteristic will be explained.

### Playing and exploring

Play and exploration are key ways that children (and adults) learn. As Vygotsky, the famous Russian psychologist whose work has been so important to our understanding of child development, stated: in play the child operates at their highest level ‘beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself’ (Vygotsky, 1978: 102). This is why it is so powerful. Because it is so important to learning, the revised Statutory Framework states that:

*Each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned and purposeful play and a mix of adult led and child initiated activity.* (EYFS, 2012: 1.9)
Finding out and exploring

Exploratory play is important to all of us. It is how babies begin to understand their surroundings and the relationships between themselves and others, using all their senses and every part of the body. Gopnik et al. (1999) describe babies and toddlers as young scientists, testing out and often repeating the same actions time and again to establish an idea about the object in question and what their own actions can do. Their explorations continue as they grow and develop.

Khyra is 2 yrs 6 mths. Today there is a large tray out on the table, and a bag of flour is being tipped out on to it. Khyra dips her hands in, then spreads the flour with her hands making swirling movements, deeply involved in watching the patterns she makes for a short while, then clapping her hands together, laughing as she does so. A few days later, the flour is put out again, but this time with water in a jug. She tips the water into the flour and feels it with her fingers, then her hands, squishing and squashing the sticky mixture as she explores the texture. Again, she is deeply involved and we can almost see the questions in her head: What is this? What does it do and what can I do with it? Such simple provision provides opportunities to explore and play with an experience rich in learning opportunities.

Playing with what they know

From the beginning as they play and explore, babies and young children build a repertoire of knowledge, skills and understanding, using memory, and they are also able to imagine possibilities. This makes it possible for them to play with what they know.
Kimarla, also aged 2 yrs 6 mths, is using her knowledge of nappy changing and care of babies, and the care she has received, as she first pretends to change this doll’s nappy (Fig 1.1) then later returns to the home corner, dressed up (Fig 1.2), to pretend to feed herself. No one has suggested either of these activities, it is her own choice, but the practitioners have provided the environment and resources they know she and others will want to make use of.

**Being willing to ‘have a go’**

Play is the ideal context for trying things out, taking risks, making mistakes and challenging ourselves – in other words, being willing to have a go. As Vivian Gussin Paley, whose work has taught us so much about child development and play, says: ‘There is no activity children are better prepared for than fantasy play. Nothing is more dependable and risk-free, and the dangers are only pretend’ (Paley, 2004: 8).
Play builds children’s confidence, because, in play, the child is in control. The subject matter, the nature of the play and the direction it takes must be the decision of the child or children, if it is play. In play, the children choose the theme, when to start and when to stop, and what will be involved. They can decide to move in and out of play at any point or repeat it as much as they like. Play helps us come to terms with fears, dangers, and the unpredictability of the world and human relationships. As adults, we can support and facilitate play, but if we take control of it, it is no longer the child’s agenda and is unlikely to bring about learning. The adult role in play is discussed further in Chapter 2.
Louis, aged just 3 years, is playing in his nursery setting with small-world animals. He has tipped them all out of the box and now begins to line some up in twos, nose to tail. He holds up two face to face, a lion and a lion cub, and we can hear him talking for them: ‘You go first baby!’ ‘No, I’m scared.’ ‘Quick, quick the monster’s coming! Hide!’ He hides them under the upturned box.

In his play we see him creating his own story, in which a great deal of knowledge and understanding is being used. The play is helping him to:

• explore what it might feel like to be someone or something else
• be in control
• explore relationships and negotiation skills
• manage feelings that may be frightening or enjoyable
• devise problems and be the one who solves them
• develop communication skills
• apply existing skills and knowledge in new ways, as well as those that are in the process of being learned and developed.

Active learning

The second characteristic of learning is not about being physically active, which of course is important in children’s learning and development, but refers to being *mentally* active and alert.

As we see in Table 1.1, it involves children in becoming deeply involved and concentrating, being motivated to persist (keep on trying) and deriving satisfaction from achieving what they have chosen to do. Those close to the child – parents and practitioners – can foster this inner drive to learn and achieve, supporting a can-do approach and building confidence, or we can all too easily discourage it.

In the Tickell Review active learning was described as arising from the ‘intrinsic motivation to achieve mastery – to experience competence, understanding and autonomy’ (Tickell, 2011: 90).
Being involved and concentrating

In order to concentrate fully on something we need to be motivated. Concentration is closely linked to the concept of involvement. The research of Ferre Laevers has shown that when children are deeply involved in what they are doing, it is likely that deep-level learning is taking place. And, ‘if deep-level learning is taking place, a person is operating at the limits of their “zone of proximal development”’ (Laevers, 2000). When a child is deeply involved she/he cannot easily be distracted. The importance of play and exploration cannot be underestimated as it is when children make their own choices, follow their natural curiosity and own train of thought that deep involvement is most likely to happen. All three children discussed earlier – Khyra, Kimarla and Louis – were deeply involved and concentrating in their play.

Keeping on trying

Keeping on trying, as it is called, is all about persistence, being motivated to master a new skill or understand a new idea, even though this may require considerable effort. The research of Carol Dweck over the past few decades has been significant in helping us understand why some children and adults are more prone to persisting when faced with a challenge than others and what we can do to help this. Dweck has identified that how we see ourselves as learners is the root of the issue, whether we have a ‘fixed mindset’, with a self-belief that tells us that our abilities are fixed and cannot be changed, or a ‘growth mindset’, through which we believe our abilities can grow and develop.

For those with a fixed mindset there is a desire to get things right from the start so as not to feel a failure, wanting to stay in the safety zone of what they know they can achieve, not taking on any new challenge: ‘As soon as children become able to evaluate themselves, some of them are afraid of challenges. They become afraid of not being smart’ (Dweck, 2008: 16). The opposite is true for those with the growth mindset, who love a challenge and will therefore keep on trying, find a way around obstacles and figure out the problem.
Dweck believes that adults can all too easily limit children’s motivation and drive to take on new challenges. How we give children praise is really important, praising a child for ‘being clever’ and for their abilities is more likely to result in developing the fixed mindset view of themselves, not wanting to persist when difficulties appear. But specific praise highlighting the processes the child is using as they attempt to do something, or keep on trying, will feed the growth mindset.

When we receive encouragement for our efforts and our ideas are valued, our feelings acknowledged and our discoveries recognised, we come to see the world as a safe place, and ourselves as competent and capable agents within it. (National Strategies, 2007: 3)

**Enjoying achieving what they set out to do**

Following on from persistence is the satisfaction gained from achieving *one’s own* intentions ‘rather than relying on the approval of others’ (Tickell, 2011: 90). The emphasis here is on the children
achieving *their own* goals, whatever these might be: to be successful and enjoy the personal pleasure of success, the goal needs to be the child’s. This will mean the child is fully signed up to it and the motivation is intrinsic, coming from within. If the motivation is extrinsic, arising from a perceived external reward, then once the reward has been achieved there is little motivation to continue. We need to take care presenting children with rewards. This is important when it comes to goals we want children to achieve. Tapping into the child’s curiosity and interests is likely to help them make the goal their own, resulting in better longer-term outcomes.

### Creating and thinking critically

The guidance materials for the 2008 EYFS provided a useful description of this learning characteristic:

> When children have opportunities to play with ideas in different situations and with a variety of resources, they discover connections and come to new and better understandings and ways of doing things. Adult support in this process enhances their ability to think critically and ask questions. (EYFS card 4.3, 2008)

Creating and thinking critically are fundamental processes in making sense of experiences and developing thought. Creativity in this sense is not about being talented in the arts, but a core aspect of the thinking process, involving imagination and helping us ‘to think flexibly ... and come up with original ideas’ (Stewart, 2011: 78). Thinking critically helps us to organise our thoughts, figure things out, solve problems and come up with new strategies. It helps us reflect on ideas and on our own thinking, and from this learn how to learn.

### Having their own ideas

In order to be able to solve problems in their daily experiences, children, like adults, need to generate their own ideas and put these to
good use. Play and exploration are fundamental to this, something we as parents or practitioners close to the child should be encouraging children to do so that they can develop their own ideas: ‘Being inventive allows children to find new problems as they seek challenge and to explore ways of solving these’ (Tickell, 2011: 90).

Enabling children to think critically and creatively means encouraging them to play and investigate, providing a rich environment with interesting things to discover, explore and wonder about and, crucially, time to do so. Some of the most important skills children need for the future are the metacognitive skills, which involve them in reflecting on their learning: ‘Awareness of oneself as a thinker and learner is a key aspect of success in learning’ (Tickell, 2011: 90).

Making links
As babies and young children make sense of their experiences, they are making connections between what they already know and new experiences. We can see the baby or toddler making these connections through their play and explorations, and later as children begin to communicate verbally, they are able to express their thoughts and ideas to themselves (as in the observation of Louis, above), as well as to others.

Communication is an important aspect of the thinking process and the more open-ended the discussions we have with young children the more we can help them talk about the connections they are making and as a result understand their own thinking better. Recent research quoted in the Early Years Learning and Development Review in 2009 showed that when children are asked to say how they solved a problem they learned more than when they were just given positive feedback on solving the problem (Evangelou et al., 2009).

Choosing ways to do things
This aspect of the Characteristics of Learning involves the child in making choices as to how to go about something and is not about following instructions. It involves ‘making choices and decisions
about how to approach a task, planning and monitoring what to do, and being able to change strategies’ (Tickell, 2011: 91). It is when children are involved in their own self-chosen activities that they are more likely to want to find the right strategy to achieve their goal.

Top tips for effective practice

The Characteristics of Effective Learning are generic: they are about how every child learns. But, to support children’s learning and development effectively, we need to pay attention to the uniqueness of every child. In this section we look very briefly at how settings and practitioners can best support children’s learning and development by paying attention to these Characteristics of Effective Learning. The next chapter spells out in more detail specific elements of the role of the practitioner.

- **Talking with parents**: supporting children’s learning and development starts with finding out about them from those who know them best, their parents, and working in close partnership with them.
- **Ensuring inclusion** means being aware of the different ways that children learn and ensuring that planning supports each unique child.
- **Tuning in and following children’s interests** is essential if practitioners are to meet the learning and development needs of every child. This means observing and listening first, so that you can tailor your input to what the child is focusing on.
- **Building confidence and a can-do attitude**: being positive, providing emotional support, encouraging children to have a go.
- **Encouraging the children to make their own choices** as well as decisions on how they may want to do things.
• **Taking care with how you praise** is important in helping children to develop a *growth mindset*. Talk with them about the strategies they are using as they attempt new challenges and solve problems. Give praise for trying, not for ‘being clever’.

• **Providing a stimulating environment**, inside and outside, not only responds to children’s interests, but also provokes new ones.

• **Motivate and challenge children’s thinking**, with opportunities for them to explore, investigate and solve problems, and plenty to fire the imagination, with and without adult support. A child who is not given the opportunity to play, explore and investigate is far less likely to be a resilient, creative learner willing to have a go, persist or think critically.

• **Allow time for children to think and reflect**.

• **Remember that play and exploration** are fundamental to learning and thinking.

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**Point for reflection**

It is worth having a look at the wealth of guidance and resources provided in the EYFS 2008, which include research papers about children’s learning and effective practice information, remembering that the major change in 2012 was changes to the areas of learning and development and the statutory assessments. The ‘Commitment Cards’ and other guidance resources remain as useful as ever. These are available on the EYFS CD-ROM. If you cannot find the EYFS CD-ROM, go to https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-00261-2008.