



Introduction

Claire Mould

This book discusses the complex, critical and highly engaging nature of the development and learning of very young children, with a focus on the birth to 3 age range. It is presented through an accessible, realistic content that is grounded in practice and underpinned with relevant theory and policy. Photographs, case studies and anecdotal narrative are employed throughout to ensure that babies, young children, their families and the practitioners who work with them remain at the heart of the publication. While many will be able to relate to several of the stories shared, understanding and knowledge will be enriched and extended as the dialogue encompasses key theories, relevant research and current policies.

Even though this book focuses specifically on birth to 3-year-olds, this should by no means detract from the fact that the term 'early years' encompasses those from birth to 8 years. However if we are to genuinely understand and develop this extensive age phase in a coherent and continuous way then we have to begin by gaining an in-depth knowledge of the development and learning of our youngest babies and children as current research informs us that these are the most neurologically sensitive and critical periods of development and learning.

The book is divided into four sections that have been carefully selected to encompass the complex and varying dimensions of babies and young children's learning journeys. They include:

- 1 Development and learning
- 2 Policy to practice
- 3 Effective leadership and management
- 4 Establishing effective relationships.

The first section focuses on issues that are pertinent to development and learning. It reinforces the idea that if early years experiences are to be meaningful and purposeful to babies and young children, and therefore developmentally effective, they must be holistic, treating the child as a whole rather than as an assortment of individual components (Chapter 1). The book

takes the stance that, in order to really understand how babies and young children develop and grow, it is essential to step back and observe the journeys the children travel throughout their development (Chapter 2). Documenting this learning process provides a narrative from which future experiences can be planned. The more we know about what children do, the closer we come to understanding why they are doing what they do. As we develop this appreciation of babies and young children's behaviour we can endeavour to support and stimulate in a sensitive and appropriate way (Chapter 3).

The second section of the book explores the reality of facilitating meaningful and stimulating practice, that is underpinned by current policy as is necessary (Chapter 4). This involves a discussion examining what constitutes motivating, purposeful learning for young children, clarifying ways in which this can still be achieved while respecting binding policies and procedures. Chapter 5 goes on to outline how a comprehensive awareness and management of legislation and policies need not be arduous and time-consuming and can enable genuine, exciting and relevant experiences. A fundamental part of sustaining and enhancing this effective practice is through the establishment and implementation of practical, accessible self-evaluation tools. The essential role of continual observation and evaluation in developing babies and young children's learning experiences and the related practicalities are examined in Chapter 6.

The third cluster of chapters focuses on the effective leadership and management of learning environments. Fundamental to this discussion is the consideration of what it is that actually constitutes a successful learning environment and how this can be developed and sustained (Chapter 7). The teams that work within this environment play an integral role in determining the nature of the success, or indeed need for development, of particular learning situations and experiences. In short, effective teams beget effective learning environments. The complexities that contribute to ensuring that the team are appropriately formed and work in a positive way are addressed in Chapter 8. In addition to a sole agency form of provision it cannot be forgotten that by the time children reach 3 years of age they, and their families, have experienced a vast, albeit differing, range of multi-agency support. Increasingly, what were once independent agencies are joining forces (not to mention expertise and experience), with the aim of providing coherent, consistent support. However, the change in dynamics within the environment as a result of this collaboration, and the affect this has on the children in their care, their families and the individual providers needs to be considered. Chapter 9 focuses on the cross-section of individuals who contribute to the child's development and learning, and addresses the reality of managing the union of these contributions to development in a way that is consistent with the children's experience and coherent for these professionals.

The final section concentrates on 'establishing effective relationships'. It begins (Chapter 10) by reinforcing and extending the realities, complexities and importance of interactions between colleagues within a setting. The narrative then broadens to consider other integral relationships that have a direct impact on the lives of babies and young children. The nature of the communications between parents and the providers who work with their child is pivotal to children's emotional well-being and assimilation of development and learning experiences (Chapter 11). If there is little or no genuine dialogue between 'significant others' then there is a risk of mixed or contrasting messages, methods and routines, resulting in the learner

feeling confused and alienated. When parents and providers share open, frequent exchanges the learning potential thrives as clear, consistent information is delivered in a sensitive and meaningful way. This section concludes with a focus on the primary importance of ensuring that the relationships that babies and young children experience are positive (Chapter 12). Research tells us that a learner's emotional well-being has a direct bearing on their cognitive learning. If an effective bond is formed between a learner and an educator (whether they be a parent or a provider) founded on knowledge and understanding of interests and needs, then learning will flourish. Where there is a lack of empathy and experiences extend from superficial assumptions, the learning potential will flounder.

