



The importance of holistic development in early years

When early years practitioners take a 'holistic' approach to the development of the children in their care, what they are doing is looking at the 'bigger picture' - reaching further than purely the academic achievements of the children - and the 'tick box exercise' that sometimes goes with that. What is happening in fact, is something very natural - and essential - within a child's development.

An integrated, holistic approach to teaching and learning focuses on connections to the natural world: holistic development in EYFS not only helps children to connect with the environment around them, but allows them to learn, discover and explore in a different way from the conventional form of education that so many adopt.

With holistic development, the focus is on the children's physical, personal, social, emotional and spiritual well-being - and the understanding of the fact that all these are interconnected. However, the cognitive and intellectual aspects of learning are certainly not forgotten - and the two work hand-in-hand.

In this guide, we explain the individual elements of holistic development and how they relate to the growth of the children in every day early years education.

Physical:

- The development of control that the child has over their own body - including muscle control, physical coordination, and the ability to sit or stand. It can also include growth, i.e. height and weight.

Emotional:

- Children developing an understanding of their own day to day emotions.
- Knowing why they feel certain ways after certain actions.
- Relating to others' feelings and understanding the effect of others' emotions, i.e. empathy.

Social:

- The development of interactions - friendships and relationships - with others.
- Developing an understanding of themselves within their community and environment.
- Understanding communications and actions of others, including dealing with conflicts.

Intellectual:

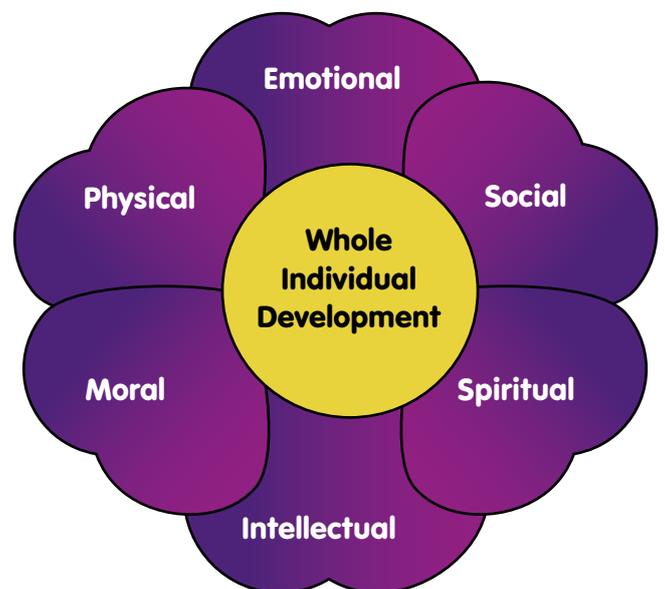
- Developing skills to recognise, understand and reason, allowing them to make sense of what is seen, touched, heard, etc.
- Language development, understanding others and expressing themselves.

Spiritual:

- Allowing their true authentic self to flourish naturally, and its connection to all that is around them.

Moral:

- Developing attitudes and behaviours towards other people in society.
- Understanding and cherishing values and ethics such as honesty, integrity and fair play, and the consequences they bring, leading to developments of responsibility and empathy.



Holistic Development and Assessments

This is an important aspect of early years childcare, especially when planning and assessing the needs of the children. Looking at the children as a whole - rather than purely from a cognitive point of view - allows you to assess the child as an individual. You will have a better idea of what they have and have not achieved, by looking at how all the developmental areas are linked up - and how progress in one area can affect progress in another area.



Many assessments of children's progress and development when taking a holistic approach will be in the form of observations. This is because it is really important to observe how different behaviours lead to learning and how the child got to the point where new learning had taken place.

Holistic Development and the EYFS

One of the many advantages of Holistic Development in EYFS is that this approach will allow you to take an everyday activity that a child enjoys and turn it into a learning opportunity – thereby developing more than one aspect at the same time during this one activity. It allows you to plan, because you know what the children enjoy and this in turn, will, of course help in their overall learning, development and well-being.

It motivates children to explore and want to learn more about a subject because it encourages interest and crucially, allows them to learn naturally and creatively. This will result not only in a child who has developed better communication and social skills, but greater confidence too; they will feel good about learning certain subjects because they will associate learning with positive experiences.

Holistic development in children with SEND

How do early years settings implement holistic development if they have children with special educational needs or disabilities? How do you help those children to have the same experiences as those without these needs?

Having a holistic approach to development when educating children with SEND is particularly fitting because as we know, efforts are focused on the very individual needs that each child has. For example, just because a child has a diagnosis of dyslexia, it doesn't mean that the old tried and tested application of using a coloured overlay will suffice – we have to be inventive!

In the [SEND Code of Practice: A guide for health professionals](#), it states:

"Our vision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is the same as for all children and young people – that they achieve well in their early years, at school and in college and make a good transition to adulthood, to lead contented and fulfilled lives. This hasn't always been the case. The SEND reforms introduced by the Children and Families Act 2014 aim to change this, with a focus on two key themes: greater cooperation between education, health and social care and a greater focus on the outcomes which will make a real difference to how a child or young person lives their life."

“For too long, health has been the missing partner in the SEND system. These reforms change that – they implement a holistic approach to supporting children and young people with SEND in all aspects of their life.”

As discussed above, taking a holistic approach means looking at the person as a whole which fits perfectly with children with SEND.

If a child in your care has SEND then it's important to try to balance any interventions that are offered in a way that benefits that person's entire being and how they live their life, not just in nursery or at school, but beyond into adulthood. It means considering various other factors in conjunction with their SEN, and which may be in addition to those factors listed in the EYFS, including:

- Social situation and family life
- Community issues
- Mental health
- Confidence and self-esteem
- Emotional intelligence
- Physical development
- Social confidence and friendships
- Creativity and self-expression
- Empathy and appreciation
- Individuality



and many more – the list will be endless!

As early years practitioners, we know that 90% of brain development occurs by the age of 5, so it is vital that our settings provide experiences that support the whole child, including the elements listed above – and it is why we should provide multiple areas of stimulation through enriched and diverse environments, but understand how each is interconnected with the other.

In many educational settings, children with special needs are often taken out of subjects they do well at (such as art or drama), in favour of studying Maths or English, but this can impact negatively on their self-esteem when they feel they are missing a subject that supports them in other ways. This is just an example, but it raises questions about whether the child's preferences could be taken into account in a more holistic approach, that doesn't impact negatively on their mental health to serve an academic outcome. In early years, we may fall into the trap of focusing on one small (academic) thing at the expense of a larger (holistic) other.

Many children with special needs also have more than one learning difficulty - people with autism can also have sensory issues, and people with dyslexia may have dyspraxia. The challenge here is to try to try to meet all of the needs in the best way possible. This is where good planning and communication are vital.

Partnerships

To provide a holistic approach to SEND, it is vital you form partnerships with others. When information is shared appropriately, instead of having just one piece of the jigsaw, everyone will begin to see the whole picture.

Parents are obviously the first port of call and will have insights that you do not, and vice versa, so setting up regular sessions to talk to the parents will help you understand what their child needs; you can also tell parents what is working well in the setting, so they can continue the practice at home.

Remember too that many parents of special needs children are under enormous stress themselves, which can impact their own mental health and well-being, and subsequently, that of the child. Offering help and support to parents via advice/support groups, meetings or just passing on relevant information that could be useful to them, will have an impact.

You should also develop partnerships with health and social care services, and they should be contacting you for updates, reviews and progress reports. By working together, plans such as EHCPs can be drawn up effectively to really support the whole child, but ensure they are regularly reviewed and amended to grow with the child.

Activities to support Holistic Development in EYFS

Forest School

Forest School is relatively new in the UK. It was introduced here in the mid 1990's by a group of nursery nurses after a visit to a Danish Forest School but has become increasingly popular over the last 25 years or so. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic increase in the demand for outdoor learning and when schools closed and the outdoors was deemed "the safest place to be" by public health officials, many turned to creative ways to get their children learning outdoors. Forest school offered the perfect opportunity for this: just merely experiencing the woodland environment can help develop physical senses and moving through the woods, climbing trees, balancing on logs or moving items between locations will develop fine motor skills.



This video from Early Years Matters TV gives some fantastic activities for holistic development for children with SEND

[HOLISTIC CHILD DEVELOPMENT | ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT - Bing video](#)

Sources and Resources:

<https://harmonylearning.com.au/why-holistic-learning-is-especially-effective/>

[Learning in the Leaves](#)

[Twinkl](#)

[Pen Green Centre](#)

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