

August 2026 - Week 3:

Knowing the Child

Beyond the Tracker

Do your practitioners really understand how each child learns?

Walk into almost any nursery and ask a practitioner to tell you about one of their key children.

They will often describe what the child enjoys, the friendships they have formed, their interests, their next steps and perhaps even where they sit within the setting's assessment process.

Now ask a different question.

"Tell me how this child learns best."

Not what they can do.

Not what they enjoy.

Not what they need to learn next.

Simply...

How do they learn?

It is a question that often creates a moment of reflection.

Not because practitioners do not know their children. Quite the opposite. Across the settings we work with, practitioners care deeply about the children they support and build meaningful relationships with them. However, somewhere along the way, many of us have become very good at describing children's development whilst giving less attention to understanding the learning behaviours that make that development possible.

Perhaps it is time to look beyond the tracker.

The Characteristics of Effective Learning Are More Than a Section of the EYFS

Most practitioners will recognise the three Characteristics of Effective Learning:

- Playing and Exploring
- Active Learning
- Creating and Thinking Critically

Yet these are far more than headings within the EYFS.

They describe how children approach learning.

How they investigate.

How they persist.

How they solve problems.

How they respond when something becomes difficult.

These characteristics should influence every interaction, every environment and every decision practitioners make throughout the day.

The question for leaders is not whether practitioners can name the Characteristics of Effective Learning.

The question is whether they use them.

Every Child Learns Differently

Some children watch quietly before joining in.

Some need to repeat an experience several times before feeling confident enough to explore it independently.

Some naturally seek challenge.

Others require reassurance before taking that first step.

One child may happily persevere for twenty minutes, whilst another quickly looks towards an adult for support.

None of these approaches are right or wrong.

They simply tell us something about the child as a learner.

When practitioners truly understand this, their interactions naturally become more responsive.

They know when to step back.

When to encourage.

When to ask a question.

When silence is more powerful than another prompt.

This is where personalised practice begins.

Observation Should Lead to Understanding

Observation is not simply about recording what happened.

Its greatest value lies in helping us understand why it happened.

A child repeatedly returns to the same construction area.

Another spends significant time transporting objects across the garden.

One experiments endlessly with water.

Another prefers observing others before becoming involved.

These are not simply interests.

They provide valuable insight into how children think, explore and make sense of the world around them.

When leaders encourage practitioners to look beyond the activity itself, observations become richer, conversations become deeper and planning becomes far more meaningful.

The Adult Can Strengthen Learning... or Interrupt It

One of the greatest influences on children's learning is not the activity.

It is the adult.

Imagine a child who has spent fifteen minutes carefully constructing a bridge.

They are testing ideas.

Changing their approach.

Trying again.

Persevering through challenge.

An adult walks over and says,

"That's lovely. Come and do some painting now."

The child did not stop learning because they had finished.

They stopped because the adult believed the learning had ended.

Understanding the Characteristics of Effective Learning helps practitioners recognise when to join play, when to extend thinking and when the greatest contribution they can make is to simply allow learning to continue.

Leading Through Better Questions

As leaders, the questions we ask shape the culture we create.

Instead of asking,

“What is this child’s next step?”

Consider asking,

“How does this child learn best?”

Instead of,

“What activity did you plan?”

Ask,

“How did your interaction support the way that child learns?”

Instead of,

“What did the children achieve?”

Ask,

“What learning behaviours did you notice today?”

These conversations shift the focus away from outcomes alone and towards understanding each child as an individual learner.

Embedding the Characteristics Across the Setting

Embedding the Characteristics of Effective Learning is not about displaying posters or referencing them within observations.

It is about creating a culture where practitioners naturally think about learning behaviours during every interaction.

As a leadership team, consider reflecting together:

- Could every practitioner confidently describe how each of their key children learns best?
- Are observations helping practitioners understand children’s learning behaviours as well as their development?
- Does the environment encourage children to explore, investigate, revisit and solve problems independently?
- Do practitioners recognise when to step back and allow children to remain deeply involved in their learning?
- Are supervision meetings exploring children’s learning behaviours, not just progress against developmental milestones?

These questions often reveal far more about the quality of practice than any tracking document ever could.

The Marathon Perspective

At Marathon Early Years Consultancy, one of the questions we frequently ask practitioners during quality improvement visits is simply:

“Tell me how this child learns best.”

The answer often tells us more about the quality of teaching than any observation or assessment record.

When practitioners understand how children learn, they naturally make better professional decisions.

They know when to challenge.

When to encourage.

When to wait.

When to celebrate persistence rather than simply the finished product.

They move beyond delivering activities and begin responding to children as unique learners.

Perhaps that is where the Characteristics of Effective Learning were always intended to lead us.

Not towards another section within an observation.

But towards a deeper understanding of every child.

Because when we truly know how children learn, we are far better placed to support what they go on to achieve.

