

October 2026 - Week 2

The Power of the Pause: What Happens When We Stop Rushing?

Pause. Notice. Extend. Finding more learning in the everyday



For the last five weeks, we have been looking at some of the most ordinary moments in an early years day.

Not the carefully planned activity.

Not the invitation to play.

Not the beautifully prepared provision.

The bits in between.

We started by asking where is the learning hiding?

We considered what happens before we do it for them.

We explored why care is more than a routine.

We questioned whether the journey is learning too.

And last week, we looked at tidying and asked whether we might sometimes be putting away much more than resources.

Throughout all five blogs, one idea has kept appearing.

Time.

Time to try.

Time to think.

Time to respond.

Time to notice.

Time to finish.

Time to struggle a little.

Time to work something out.

Time to return.

And perhaps that leads us to the biggest question of the series:

What happens when we stop rushing?

"Come On, We Need To..."

Listen carefully in almost any busy early years setting and you will probably hear versions of the same phrases.

"Come on."

"Quickly."

"We're going outside."

"We need to wash our hands."

"Let's get tidied up."

"We're going to be late for lunch."

"Let me do it."

None of these phrases make someone a poor practitioner.

They usually tell us something else.

We're busy.

There are children to care for.

Routines to manage.

Ratios to maintain.

Meals arriving.

Nappies to change.

Sleep routines.

Parents at the door.

Staff breaks.

Paperwork.

And a timetable quietly ticking away in the background.

The challenge is that when adults begin feeling rushed, children often experience that rush too.

And the quickest way to make something happen?

Do it for them.

Efficiency Can Be Very Tempting

Imagine a child trying to fasten their coat.

They are struggling.

You know you could do it in three seconds.

You are also trying to get six other children into the garden.

So you reach down.

Zip.

Done.

Perfectly reasonable.

Except perhaps the child was just about to work it out.
We see the same thing everywhere.
An adult pulls up the child's sleeve before handwashing.
Moves the chair.
Finds the missing shoe.
Pours the water.
Opens the container.
Carries the plate.
Puts the block in the right basket.
Finishes the sentence.
Answers the question.
Solves the problem.
Often with the very best intentions.
And often because it is quicker.
But adult efficiency and children's learning don't always sit comfortably together.
Sometimes learning is wonderfully inefficient.
It takes time.

The Five-Second Difference

One of the smallest changes we can make to practice is also one of the hardest.

Wait.

A child is trying to remember what comes next.

Wait.

A child is reaching for something.

Wait.

A child is trying to answer your question.

Wait.

A child is struggling with a zip.

Wait.

A child has encountered a problem in their play.

Wait.

Not indefinitely.

Not when they genuinely need help.

Not when safety requires us to intervene.

Just long enough to find out:

What can this child do without me?

Five seconds can feel surprisingly long when you're used to stepping in.

But those few seconds can completely change what we see.

The child might solve it.

Try something different.

Look for help.

Ask another child.

Use language.

Remember.

Persist.

Or show us that they genuinely need support.

All of those responses tell us something.

But we only see them if we give children enough time to respond.

Are We Asking Questions We Don't Give Children Time to Answer?

This is particularly noticeable in our interactions.

"What do you think will happen?"

Pause.

One second.

Two seconds.

"Do you think it'll fall down?"

We have answered our own question.

Or:

"What did you do at the weekend?"

The child begins thinking.

"Did you go to the park?"

Sometimes we are so eager to sustain an interaction that we accidentally take it over.

Young children need processing time.

Some children need considerably more than others.

Children learning English as an additional language may be processing meaning across more than one language.

Children with SEND may need additional time to understand the question, organise their response or communicate it.

And sometimes children simply need time because thinking takes time.

Silence isn't necessarily an absence of learning.

Sometimes silence is where the learning is happening.

Slow Doesn't Mean Doing Less

This is important.

When I talk about slowing down pedagogy, I don't mean making nursery days lethargic.

I don't mean children wandering around with nothing happening.

And I certainly don't mean practitioners withdrawing from interactions.

Slowing down isn't doing less.

It is becoming more deliberate about what we do.

Knowing when to step forward.

Knowing when to step back.

Knowing when to speak.

Knowing when to wait.

Knowing when a routine genuinely needs to move quickly.

And knowing when the pressure to hurry is coming from us rather than the child.

Good practitioners can be incredibly active while appearing very calm.
They are watching.
Listening.
Positioning themselves.
Anticipating.
Responding.
Thinking.
And intervening when their involvement will add something.
That is not passive practice.
It is highly skilled practice.

What Are We Rushing Children Towards?

This question appeared in Week 4, and I think it deserves another visit.

What are we rushing towards?

The next activity?

The garden?

Lunch?

Group time?

A planned experience?

Sometimes the destination matters.

But if getting there means repeatedly interrupting meaningful learning, perhaps we need to question the organisation rather than the child.

There can be an unspoken belief in early years that the planned part of the day is somehow more valuable than everything surrounding it.

We rush children through handwashing so they can get to the activity.

We dress them quickly so they can get outside.

We tidy their resources so they can get to group time.

We solve the problem so the play can continue.

But what if the thing we're rushing through was the learning?

The handwashing.

The coat.

The tidying.

The problem.

The conversation.

The journey.

The waiting.

The decision.

Perhaps we have been so focused on the next learning opportunity that we haven't noticed the one happening in front of us.

The Timetable Should Serve the Children

Early years settings need structure.

Children benefit from predictable routines.

Teams need organisation.

Meals arrive at particular times.

Staff need breaks.

Ratios matter.

There will always be things that have to happen.

But there is a difference between having a structure and being controlled by one.

If children are repeatedly being interrupted because it's time, we should perhaps look at the timetable.

If practitioners spend large parts of their day saying come on, we should perhaps look at the timetable.

If every child must stop, move, eat, sleep, tidy and participate at exactly the same moment, we should perhaps look at the timetable.

The question isn't:

How do we make children fit our routine more efficiently?

It is:

How well does our routine work for the children?

That is a leadership question as much as a practitioner one.

Do Practitioners Have Permission to Pause?

This may be the most important question in this entire series.

Because we can tell practitioners:

"Follow the child's interests."

"Give children time."

"Don't interrupt sustained play."

"Support independence."

"Have meaningful interactions."

But what happens when the organisation of the setting tells them something completely different?

Lunch must start now.

Everyone needs to be outside.

The room must be tidy.

The activity needs setting up.

The observations need completing.

The next routine needs starting.

The practitioner might know that the child needs another two minutes.

But do they feel they are allowed to give it?

That is where leadership matters.

A slower pedagogy cannot simply rely on individual practitioners deciding to slow down.

The culture has to give them permission to do it.

What Does Your Setting Reward?

This is worth reflecting on as a leader.

What gets praised?

The practitioner who has every child sitting beautifully for group time?

The room that is immaculate by 5pm?

The team that gets everyone outside quickly?

The practitioner whose paperwork is always complete?

Or do we also notice the practitioner who sits quietly beside a child and waits?

The person who protects a construction because they recognise the thinking behind it?

The practitioner who allows a child to struggle with their shoe rather than immediately taking over?

The team member who changes the plan because the children are deeply engaged in something else?

The practitioner who says:

"We were going to tidy up, but they weren't finished."

These are pedagogical decisions.

And if we want thoughtful practitioners, we need cultures that value thoughtful practice.

Busy Doesn't Always Mean Purposeful

Early years has developed a strange relationship with busyness.

A busy room can look productive.

Adults moving.

Children moving.

Activities happening.

Resources changing.

Music playing.

Questions being asked.

But activity isn't the same as learning.

Sometimes the most powerful moment in a room is very quiet.

A child concentrating.

A practitioner observing.

A problem being worked through.

Two children negotiating.

Someone repeating something until they master it.

A baby studying another person's face.

A toddler carefully pouring water.

A preschool child returning to yesterday's construction.

Nothing spectacular.

Nothing particularly Instagrammable.

But potentially incredibly important.

Learning doesn't always look busy.

Pause. Notice. Extend.

Throughout this series, we have returned to these three words.

Not as another initiative.

Not as another piece of paperwork.

And certainly not as another three things practitioners need to remember to write down.

They are simply a way of thinking.

Pause

Before stepping in.

Before giving the answer.

Before moving the child.

Before doing it for them.

Before ending the play.

Before following the timetable automatically.

Wait.

Notice

What is actually happening?

What is the child trying to do?

What do they already know?

What are they practising?

What are they communicating?

What is capturing their attention?

What might happen if I don't intervene yet?

Extend

And only then:

Would my involvement add something?

Perhaps it is a word.

A question.

A resource.

A demonstration.

A suggestion.

A little physical support.

A different environment.

Or perhaps the best extension is simply:

more time.

Try Doing Nothing

For the final challenge in this series, I want to suggest something that can feel surprisingly uncomfortable.

Choose a moment when your instinct is to intervene.

And for a few seconds:

Do nothing.

Watch.

Listen.

Give the child time.

See what happens next.

You might discover that they don't need you.

You might discover that another child steps in.

You might hear language you hadn't expected.

You might see persistence.

Problem-solving.

Negotiation.

Memory.

Creativity.

Frustration.

Resilience.

Or you might discover that the child does need you.

And when you step in, you will be responding to what you have actually observed rather than what you assumed would happen.

That tiny pause changes the interaction.

What Happens When We Stop Rushing?

Perhaps children become more independent.

Perhaps conversations become richer.

Perhaps practitioners notice more.

Perhaps routines become calmer.

Perhaps children persist for longer.

Perhaps we interrupt less.

Perhaps we understand children's development more accurately because we actually see what they can do.

Perhaps environments become less about moving children through the day and more about allowing them to experience it.

And perhaps practitioners begin to realise something important too.

They don't have to create learning every minute of the day.

Children are already learning.

Our job isn't always to manufacture the next opportunity.

Sometimes it is simply to recognise the opportunity that is already there.

The Learning Was There All Along

When I started this series, I wanted us to look at the parts of the day that can easily become invisible.

Putting on shoes.

Washing hands.

Making beds.

Moving to the garden.

Tidying resources.

Waiting.

Getting dressed.

Carrying things.

Trying.

Struggling.

Working something out.

They can look like the gaps between the curriculum.

But perhaps there aren't really any gaps.

Because for a young child, the day isn't divided into:

learning

and

everything else.

It's all experience.

It's all information.

It's all relationship.

It's all opportunity.

And when we slow down enough to see that, our role begins to change.

We don't always need to add more.

Sometimes we need to notice more.

So perhaps the final question isn't:

Where can we create another learning opportunity?

Perhaps it is:

What might we see if we simply paused long enough to notice the one already happening?

Pause. Notice. Extend.

Not just for an activity.

Not just for a routine.

But as a way of thinking about every child, every day.



Steps for Early Years 5