What makes an effective pre-school?
Key issues addressed by the study

- This study explored:
  - the teaching and learning models and practices used in the most effective pre-school settings
  - links between effective settings and parent participation
The key characteristics of the most effective pre-school centres

- High quality pre-school centres provided:
  - a balance between teacher-led and freely chosen activities
  - differentiation which enabled children to build on their own starting points
  - opportunities to challenge children’s thinking
The benefits of high-quality pre-school for children

- Improved thinking skills
- Good quality adult–child interactions
- Enhanced behaviour and social skills development
- Positive responses from adults to children’s emotional and learning needs
Practices seen in effective centres

Adults:
- balanced group work with freely chosen activities
- differentiated activities to challenge children
- provided support so children could reach beyond what they could do already
- asked open ended questions
- displayed non-critical attitudes
- encouraged children to try new experiences
- modelled activities
Parents/carers can help

- There were further positive effects on the children’s development of thinking and understanding where parents or carers:
  - were aware of the learning activities taking place within school
  - built upon these experiences in the cultural context of the home
Kinds of interactions that were effective

- Where adults involved themselves in the children’s play and extended their thinking through questioning

  Child: We found a coconut!
  Teacher: Well done! Oh it’s an acorn, if we planted it what do you think would grow?
  Child: A flower
  Teacher: Not quite, if it came off that tree what would grow?
  Child: Don’t know!
  Teacher: OK, let’s get a pot, some stones and plant it to see… What do you think it will grow into?
  Child: A tree
What helped to develop children’s thinking skills

- Adults modelling appropriate language, behaviour, skills and attitudes
- Both the teacher and the child contributing to the learning process
- The opportunity for children to be active and take the initiative to learn
- Sustained shared thinking and scaffolding
What scaffolding and sustained shared thinking involves

- **Scaffolding** is when an adult provides the support needed for a child to achieve a task and then gradually reduces the support to allow the child to become independent at it.

- **Sustained shared thinking** involves:
  - the adult responding to the child’s understanding / capability
  - the child’s awareness of what is to be learned
  - the active co-construction of an idea of skill
Who were the children in the study?

- The main study followed the progress of 3000 children, aged 3 plus, in 141 pre-school settings in six English Local Authorities.
- This study involved 10 boys and 10 girls from each of a sub-set of 14 pre-school settings.
- Pupils were identified by practitioners to provide a range of ability and age.
How was the information gathered?

- Data collected at each of the 14 case study preschool settings included:
  - written analysis of the setting
  - transcripts of interviews conducted with staff members and managers
  - observations of two practitioners followed in each setting and selected vignettes and 'critical incidents' observed
  - parental interviews
  - floor plans showing the inside and outdoor learning and play environment
How can teachers use the evidence in this study?

- The study identified ways in which adults could stimulate children’s thinking.
- **How could you increase:**
  - the scope for freely chosen activities?
  - respond more proactively to opportunities for engaging in shared thinking?
  - increase open-ended tasks for which children will need to work together to find solutions?
  - encourage parents and carers to build on learning activities experienced in school in the home environment e.g. through using a home school book to record briefly these activities and offer suggestions for parents and carers to follow up?
How can leaders use the evidence in this study?

- High quality pre-school learning environments shared a number of characteristics including adults asking open questions and differentiating activities to challenge children.

- Could you encourage staff to share effective approaches through observation of each other’s practice either as a whole staff or as part of an action research cycle? For example, would it be useful to monitor the number of open and closed questions used within a particular session?
Follow-up reading


- Summary available at: [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/early_years/Researchingpedagogy/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/themes/early_years/Researchingpedagogy/)
Feedback

- Did you find this useful?
- What did you like?
- What didn’t you like?

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