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Introduction

The observation, assessment and planning cycle is one that is familiar to early years practitioners. We all understand the importance of observing children as they play and explore. We assess their progress through the tools and systems we use in our settings and plan appropriate activities according to their individual needs. However, all too often, being caught up with time-consuming written observations to provide evidence that children are progressing well in their learning, and planning their next steps takes too much time. The quality of the information we gather on children and how we use this to help children develop and learn can become lost in the demands of the process. In addition, the time taken to do this means that children have often moved on and the 'next step' is no longer relevant the following day or week when introduced.

This publication looks at the importance of a flexible, child-led planning process. The basis for this is children's natural desire to explore and learn through their play. Instead of giving children a variety of activities and resources decided on by adults, child-led planning allows them to find their own interests. Practitioners can then consider how to enhance and build upon children's existing knowledge once they observe the interest – planning in the moment rather than waiting to plan for this in the future.

Flexible, child-led planning is not about planning for the longer term on a weekly basis. It's about creating an exciting environment where children can find what they need and about practitioners who understand the needs and interests of children and can see the moment where their intervention might help the child learn something new – the 'next step'.

Planning in the moment might mean no forward written planning but it does mean each practitioner must know and understand their

individual children, what their interests are, their likes, dislikes, quirky ways, how they play, what they play with, in fact everything about them!

It is not about forgetting the importance of observation, assessment and planning but it is about doing these things instantly. You need to observe children closely to see when they become deeply engaged with something, often called the child's 'spark'. You must then continue to observe while you wait for a moment when you think your intervention will make a difference - the 'teachable moment' where you teach the child the next step.

Planning in the here and now is about understanding what really matters to each child at that moment in time. It gives each child the opportunity to learn and progress through exploration and through sensitive timely interventions.