



The Complete Introduction to
Early Years Pedagogy

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Our Contributors



Lyndsey Hellyn and Stephanie Bennett are creators of **The Curiosity Approach**, an early years pedagogy founded on a natural, comfortable, curiosity-filled environment.

They provide resources, training, and consultancy on their pedagogy, while running a number of settings pioneering the approach.

Geoff Mason is the Founder and Director of the **Forest School Association**, and also runs his own setting, **Wood Learn Forest School**, on the Isle of Wight. He believes passionately in the transformative power of forest school and thinks that every child and young person should have the opportunity to take part in quality forest school provision.



Rebecca Cargill established **Blue Fox Forest School** in London, which she started after losing faith in mainstream education. After completing her level 3, she met a Park Ranger who wanted to develop an area of woodland and the idea for Blue Fox was born.



What is an early years pedagogy?

Trying to get your head around every early years pedagogy out there can be a bit...messy, can't it?

Most simply, pedagogy is about how we educate children and help their development. It's the techniques and strategies you can use to provide opportunities for development and how your relationships and interactions with children can affect them.

And while we have concrete learning frameworks that you have to follow in the UK, the tools you have to use beyond that rely heavily on your knowledge of early years pedagogy.

An early years pedagogy can be many things, but it may touch on things like:

- Development – Focusing on how and why children learn and develop over time.
- Behaviour – How a child's experiences shape their behaviour.
- Relationships – How children change and learn in relation to those around them.
- Culture – How family life and culture impact learning and relationships.
- Critique – Inviting you to challenge assumptions and issues around power, equality, and curriculum expectations.

So whether you're in for a bit of a refresh yourself, or you want to pass some knowledge onto your team, it's time for some learning and self-reflection.



Six popular pedagogies

Time to jump in at the deep end. We're going to run through six influential early years pedagogies, and what they could mean for your practice.

Remember - these pedagogies don't necessarily disagree with one another. You don't need to just pick one and run with it. Take onboard what inspires you and start improving your early years practice one little step at a time.

1. Montessori

The basic principles

- Crafting a safe, ordered, and nurturing environment that encourages self-directed, hands-on learning.
- Features a range of natural, often open-ended resources that match the five Montessori curriculum areas.
- These five curriculum areas are: practical life, sensorial, mathematics, language, and culture.
- Practitioners play a crucial role in providing the right materials for children to explore at the right point in their development.
- Every resource has a specific place and a role to play.

How can it affect my provision?

- If not Montessori-specific resources, consider providing more open-ended resources that allow children to direct their own play and make choices for themselves.
- A calm, focused environment is a core feature of a Montessori education. Could you cut down on some of the clutter in your setting and create a more ordered space?
- Montessori emphasises opportunities for independence as early as possible in daily tasks, including cooking and preparing food or tidying away, developing life skills and respect for things.



2. Froebel

The basic principles

- Childhood is more than just preparation for adulthood.
- All learning is linked, and so every different area of learning can impact others.
- Child-initiated play is very important as it means that the child is motivated and engaged.
- Always start with what children can do, not what they can't.

How can it affect my provision?

- Froebel puts a lot of emphasis on self-discipline. Consider whether you're providing an environment in which children can concentrate and remain focused on the task at hand.
- How well do your practitioners know their children? Make sure your practitioners know how to simplify certain activities so that every child can confidently and happily play.
- Constructive play forms a large part of the Froebelian approach, as well as plenty of opportunities to talk, listen, and communicate with adults and other children.



3. Steiner/Waldorf

The basic principles

- Learning should be experienced through the course of regular daily tasks and activities.
- The environment is central, and shouldn't overstimulate children. It should be familiar to them.
- Natural, open-ended resources feature heavily, leaving room for the child's imagination.
- A homely environment is preferred in order to make children feel welcome, and each child should have a place where their things belong.

How can it affect my provision?

- To Steiner, 'doing' is learning. Therefore you should give children as many physical activities as possible and opportunities to learn from the real world in order to 'grasp' the world around them.
- Use language to allow all activities to encompass different areas. Mathematics can be learnt while children prepare food, for instance, as you give them the language of adding, subtracting, weighing, and measuring.
- Routine and repetition help children to find their place in the world, so consider whether your routine could be less chaotic and more comforting for the children.



4. Reggio Emilia

The basic principles

- Every child should be seen as strong, capable and resilient, and ready to explore.
- Children are natural communicators, and it's important that we understand the '100 languages of children'.
- Children can build their own learning, and require adults to help support it, not instruct.
- The focus on exploratory and child-led play is meant to improve problem-solving skills in particular.

How can it affect my provision?

- Children should be made to feel like their conversations with adults are an opportunity to learn and search together. Practitioners need to have the time and patience to really engage with children and pay attention to what they're saying.
- Consider how your practitioners engage with the children by undertaking peer observations. Ensure that they're acting as a guide and not interrupting or quashing children's interests.
- Emphasise a hands-on approach to learning. This includes drawing, dancing, painting and pretend play, music, sculpting. Giving children opportunities to express themselves is key.

5. Bandura

The basic principles

- Adults are models for behaviour, both good and bad.
- This includes modelling calm, respectful behaviour, as well as the way we interact with one another.
- Thinking out loud is important to show thought process, and adults should have problem-solving discussions with one another to demonstrate cooperation.

How can it affect my provision?

- Adults need to carefully consider their actions, knowing that their behaviour can and will be copied by children. For example, are your practitioners eating with and displaying good eating habits around the children?
- Don't be afraid to have discussions together to solve problems in front of your children. You are modelling good cooperative behaviour.
- Consider talking through your thought processes out loud in front of children to model conscious thinking and consideration.



6. Athey and Schemas

The basic principles

- The main thread of Athey's thinking was about identifying and encouraging patterns of repeated behaviour that we call schemas.
- Athey's schemas were: dynamic vertical, dynamic back and forth, dynamic circular, going over and under, going round a boundary, going through a boundary, containing and enveloping space.
- Adults must observe, understand and then provide opportunities for the child to explore their schema further.

How can it affect my provision?

- Education of your practitioners is key. Like all observation, the skill comes from being able to recognise different schemas at work, so that we can both assess a child's development and provide more opportunities for them to learn in a way that engages them.
- Schemas can be very helpful in understanding what might look like 'bad behaviour'. Is the child throwing objects around, or are they experimenting with trajectories? Are they obsessed with ruining your carefully curated playspace, or are they fascinated by transporting? Understanding schemas can help clarify these questions.

Wait there's more...



This is absolutely not an exhaustive list of every early years pedagogy out there. If you want to explore more pedagogies, here's a list of some other philosophies and thinkers that you can look into:

- Piaget – Helped us understand how a child constructs a mental model of the world.
- Vygotsky – Focused on the value of play and how children learn based on their environment.
- Watson – Developed behaviourism – that learning is developed through how we connect things.
- Bowlby – Focused on attachment and it aids development.
- Freud – Among many other things, connected relationships with development of a unique personality.
- Bruner – Coined the term scaffolding and expanded the idea of children as active learners.
- Gardner – Encouraged respect for different forms of 'intelligence'.
- Goleman – Worked particularly with emotional intelligence.
- Mcmillan – Had a key role in influencing positive early years practice after the war.
- Bronfenbrenner – Gave us a better understanding of how the environment affects the child.
- Erikson – Developed various stages of development with positive vs negative potential results at each stage.
- HighScope – Advocates for daily routine and daily plan-do-review.
- Laevers: Developed the Leuven Scales of wellbeing and involvement to better understand children.

Forest School

Now it's time to delve a little more into some specific pedagogies. First up, we're going to talk about forest school. We've got a little help on this from Geoff Mason, Founder and Director of the Forest School Association, and Rebecca Cargill, who runs Blue Fox Forest School in London.

What is forest school?

Forest school as we know it began in the 50s in Denmark.

"Forest School is an inspirational process," Geoff explains, "that offers all learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees."

Children aim to develop a close relationship with nature, engage with risk, and follow their own interests. They cover the EYFS, of course, but through everyday interactions with the real world around them.

"Forest School is about creating a safe environment where all learning styles are supported, creativity can be maximised and having a go is encouraged," Rebecca explains.

It's more than just throwing on some wellies and going for a tramp through the woods. While the woodland environment is the preferred habitat of the forest school, the key to the pedagogy lies in giving children choice and freedom – it's not just climbing trees and using wood saws.



The key principles of forest school



The Forest School Association has clarified the pedagogy into six clear principles that they feel typify a strong forest school pedagogy.

The principles say that forest school:

- **Is long-term and regular** – Should take place at least once every other week, and be consistent to give time for practitioners to plan, adapt, observe and review.
- **Takes place in woodland or a natural environment with trees** – This is to enable a close personal relationship between the learner and the natural world.
- **Promotes holistic development** – That means fostering resilience, confidence, independence, and creativity. It should also cover all areas of a child's development.
- **Should involve risk** – Children should be able to take calculated risks and learn about their own boundaries in a safe, risk-assessed environment.
- **Has practitioners who continuously develop** – You should have a level-three FS practitioner involved. High ratios, first aid qualifications, and reflective practice are also key.
- **Puts the learner first** – Play and choice are central, as are observations which feed into the scaffolding of relevant interests. There should be interesting choices for all types of learners.

How to Introduce Forest School

We know that not every setting is in the middle of the woods. But forest school can and should be available to everyone. Here's how to get started.

1. Visit a forest school setting

The best place to start? Get on the phone and find a local forest school to go and visit.

It's the perfect inspiration for you and your team to see what you could end up with after some hard work, plus you'll understand challenges and get a chance to ask some questions.

Don't let a lack of space prevent you from getting started. Use your contacts, creativity, and desire to allow your participants to experience the magic of forest school.



2. Start small

You don't need to go straight to full forest school provision. Regularity is important to forest school, but the minimum session frequency recommended by the Forest School Association is once every other week for every child.

The key is continuity, so once you've committed, make sure that you have the things in place to carry on. Taking small groups to begin with, is also important to the whole ethos, according to Rebecca:

The principles of forest school can be applied in any outdoor setting, however urban. Take small groups, don't over-think it and see what happens – you can be confident that the children will have ideas.



3. Get the training right

What's next? Time to train. To be associated with the Forest School movement properly in the UK, you need to have a qualified level-three practitioner, and you can get the training for this online or in person

You can receive free level-one training online to get a taster too, and of course, there's always the option to hire a level-three FS practitioner to your setting.

This is really where the bulk of your investment goes, so find a member of staff that is passionate and wants to remain at your setting.

4. Risk assessments

High ratios are important to combat risk, but you do need to risk assess whatever areas you're using too.

For this, you may need to reframe the way you see risk. First, you need to see the full benefits of certain risky activities like using fire or tools, which may seem inappropriate if you don't understand how valuable they can be to a child's confidence.

From here, one simple truth is that if the reward is high, and the risk is either very low impact or very unlikely, then the benefits will probably outweigh the risk.

5. Find an area

Don't know where to start with finding an area of land for your forest school? Start by:

- Talking to the council.
- Getting in touch with your local authority.
- Seeing if there's rugged space in a local park that you can use.
- Contact local landowners.
- Place ads locally – you might be pleasantly surprised with what turns up.

Whether it is a full forest or a 20m x 20m corner of 'wild area' within an establishment, it is important that the site is natural. It should not be made artificially 'safe'. There needs to be sticky-out branches, nettles, brambles, muddy puddles – the things that make exploration and 'wild' play exciting and challenging.



6. Have a first-aider

Many forest school courses will require you to have a first aid certificate already, while others include it in the training.

Either way, if you're planning on increasing your outdoor provision in any way, it's important that you look into specialist outdoor first aid certificates. The risks are slightly higher outdoors and you need someone who knows what to do in an emergency.

7. Ask about your insurance

Lots of people worry about insurance, but you needn't make it so complex. Just call up your insurer and see – a lot of providers are already covered.

If not, your costs aren't exactly going to skyrocket. We've heard of providers paying no more than £40 extra to cover the equipment and the extra risk.

8. Understand risky play

No child learns wrapped up in cotton wool and risky play is great for children to learn their boundaries and improve their physical development, motor control, balance, and coordination.



The calculated risks they take at forest school empower them to make calculated risks in other areas of life. Children who are selected mutes or have speech impediments feel mentally free in the natural environment and it's a safe way for everyone to learn, talk, communicate freely. They feel physically and mentally free and so they take risks, make mistakes and give things a go.

9. A new approach to planning

The child-led approach that forest school follows tends to minimise any adult-selected activities, focusing more on the practitioner as a facilitator who helps children to follow their interests. They support their play with scaffolding rather than providing explicit instructions for activities.

The observation is still king, but many forest school practitioners find that an In-The-Moment Planning approach suits the forest school pedagogy better.



10. Sort out your equipment

The economic impact of the equipment for forest schooling is a barrier to many settings. If you're strapped for cash, look into outdoor funding grants to help you with the costs of equipment and even training.

In terms of how to prioritise, start by covering the basics. Warmth, food, drink, safety. A toilet.

Waterproofs are also a good investment, or the laundry bills are going to start stacking up.



Benefits of forest school



With the focus on the learner, a slightly more open approach to risk, and the everyday experiences with nature, forest school has plenty of developmental benefits for children.

According to Geoff and Rebecca, these include:

- Resilience
- Increased physical development
- Competence to explore and discover
- Confidence
- Self-esteem
- Independence
- Providing a real context for language development
- Recognising appropriate risk and overcoming challenges
- Freedom and choice
- Opportunities for problem-solving
- Engagement with their own learning
- Experiencing mastery and success
- Experiencing failure and making mistakes
- Cooperation and teamwork
- Understanding cold and warmth
- An understanding of the natural world and their place in it

11. Trust the kids

Ultimately? The key to forest schooling is trusting the children that you look after.

One example of this is understanding how in forest school, watching can actually be taking part.

Some children are apprehensive at first and need time to absorb activities like tool use before they feel ready to have a go. Children who have been in the mainstream education system often find this difficult as they are always waiting for someone to tell them what to do.



It's a process, and it will take some time to find the right approach for your setting. You need to trust the children to engage safely in risk. Trust them to learn by doing what they're interested in, not some activity you found on the internet. By exploring, being inquisitive, and having hands-on experiences with the real world.

It's about having confidence in the children and not getting hung up on how many trees you have. Taking children outside and removing a pencil from their hands allows different types of learners to shine.



The Curiosity Approach Interview

Lyndsey Hellyn and Stephanie Bennett are the pioneers of a pedagogy that combines Reggio, Steiner, Te Whāriki, and a sprinkle of Montessori. It's called The Curiosity Approach, and it focuses on a neutral, natural environment that is calming for children.

Here's a few top quotes from our interview with them, and some tips on how you can employ their approach at your setting.



On curiosity

We just want to keep it simple – it's about curiosity. Curiosity is innate within every single one of us and to be a learner in anything, you need to be curious.

On overstimulation

Some people want to offer the busy bright walls, but there is a lot of research out there to show the overstimulation effect on children and how it can feel.



Stimulation might be important for learning, but overstimulation can cause crankiness, tiredness, upset, anger, and miscommunication.

On plastic

Plastic all smells the same, feels the same and often comes in bright colours that overstimulate children. On the other hand, if you're recycling and sourcing open-ended resources and natural materials, you're bringing different elements, textures, feels and smells. That sense of curiosity and wonder will come with it.

On the future

In 30 years time, half the jobs we have now will not be in existence. The best thing that we can do for our children is to create thinkers and doers. To manage and take risks. To be curious. Because curiosity is the spark that ignites everything else.



On risks and consequences

Plastic toys are pretty indestructible and a child might just throw it on the floor and never consider picking it up. The staff don't consider it either, so generally, there are no consequences.

On a real-life example...

Take a plastic garage for example. It's pre-designed, manufactured and the designer has it in mind what they want you to do.

You've got a little lift that you put your car in, you wind it and up it goes to the first floor, second floor, and back down the ramp. The next time you play with it it goes up the lift and down the ramp.

From the first day you play with it until the 20th, nothing changes. The ramp is set, still the same trajectory. But when you have open-ended resources and loose parts – drain pipes, guttering, cable reels, even bits of cardboard – children create their own garage.

On tunnel vision

We all get tunnel vision with our environment, but we have to look at it with fresh eyes, and really reflect on what it feels like to be a child in the setting.

On finding a purpose

If you have a purpose and a 'why' then that's absolutely fine. But don't do it just because that's what you think you have to do.



A good place to start is cutting down the clutter. Too much choice can lead to overstimulation. If you can't find the purpose, then it's time to take it out.

On the child's level

Get down on the floor and look at your provision from a child's point of view. It's not just about looking at your environment, but seeing it, and feeling it.



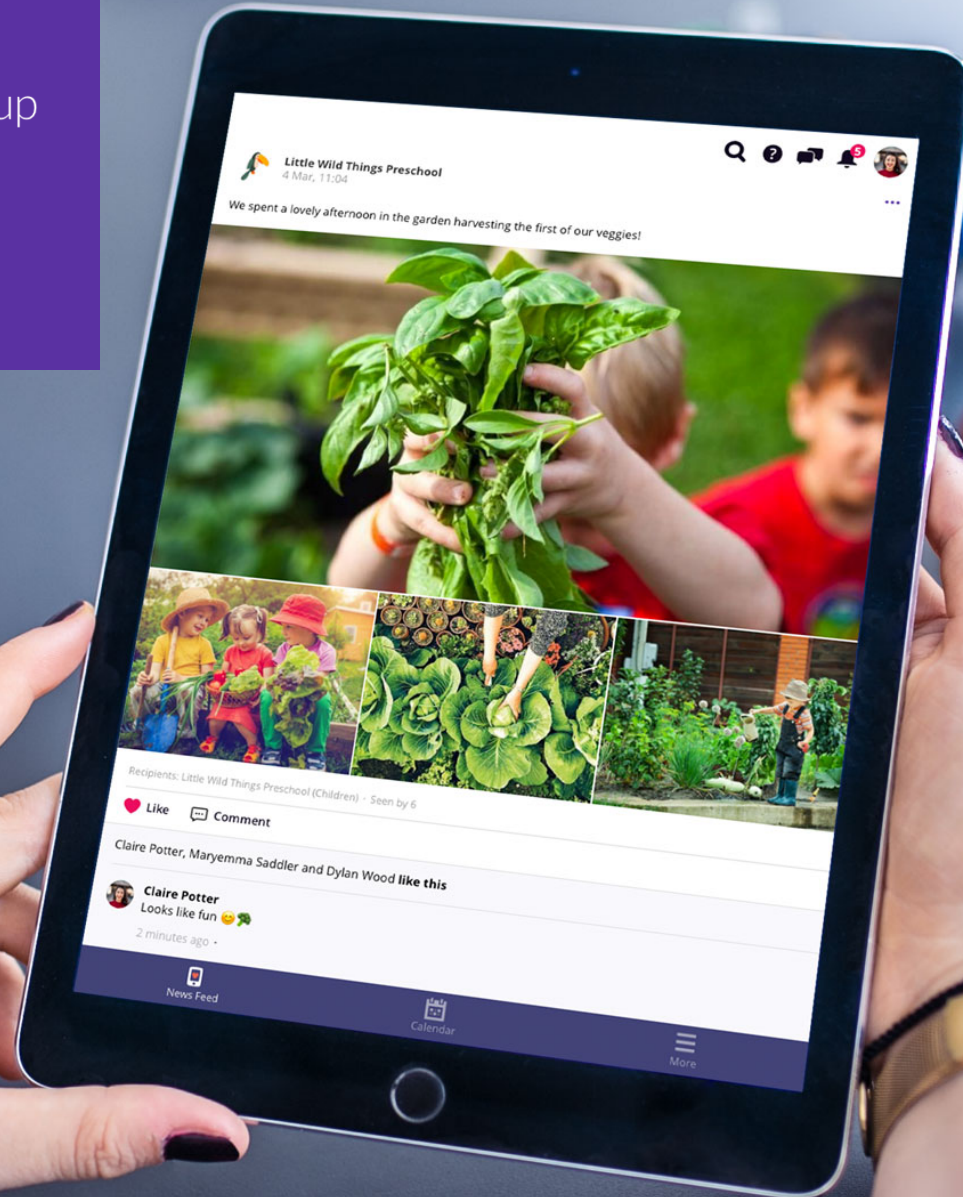
Ask questions like 'What does it look like from down there?', 'How do things smell, look, sound, and feel?', 'Are things too high?', or 'Could it be overbearing to a child?'



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On where to start

A good place to start would be to look at the overstimulation of your environment. Our settings are not colourless, but our backgrounds still remain neutral. Any colour that is in there means that it comes through. That's where I would start.



Try painting over lurid, bright walls with cream or white instead of primary colours. Give hessian or plain card a try for the display backings.

On making it homely

Is your environment an extension of home or a watered down version of a school? Are there soft rugs? Is there a space that you can share with an adult or another child to read a story? Is there a place to retreat?



On your practitioners

As a practitioner, you must be mindful. You need to make sure that in every single element of the day, the children are at the centre of everything. You can teach knowledge, but you can't teach passion.



They might be a level-six, or they might be an apprentice, but unless they can get down on the floor and play with the children, having fun along the way, then they won't find a way to inspire curiosity.

On the throwaway society

We live in a throwaway society, and what are we teaching our children when you can just throw a teapot down and it doesn't really matter? These children will be the caretakers of this planet and if we're not teaching them these lessons at a young age then what hope have we got?

On resources

It's about understanding why you're putting those things in, how you're presenting them, and why you're presenting them in a certain way.



Ask yourself questions like 'What learning opportunity does it create?', 'Is it open-ended?', 'Is it exciting?', and 'Will it ignite curiosity?'.



Te Whāriki

Have you heard of Te Whāriki? The popular pedagogy from New Zealand is more and more influential on this side of the globe. Here's the lowdown.

What is Te Whāriki?

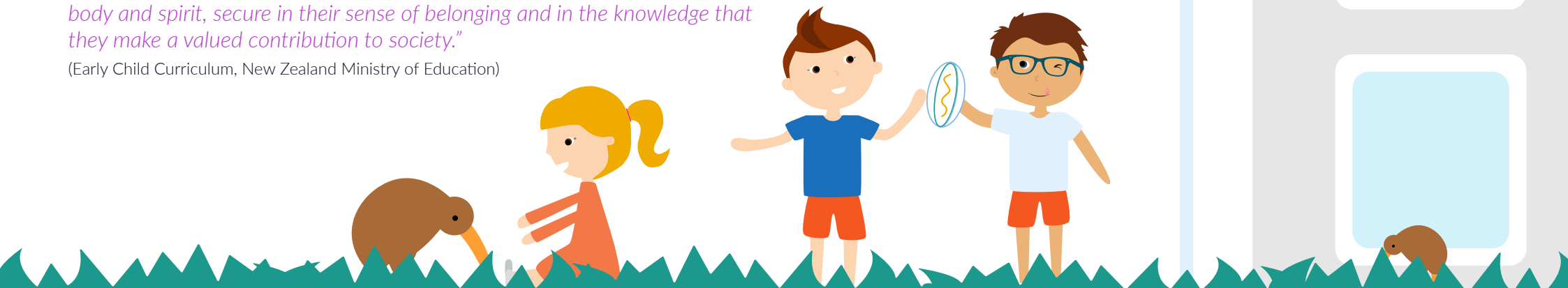
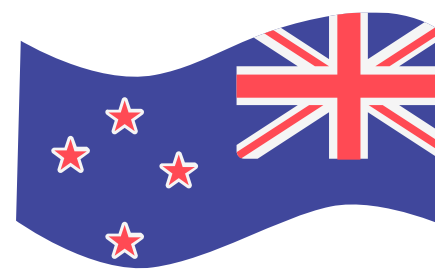
From birth until school entry, New Zealand emphasises the critical role of social and cultural learning, and of relationships for young children. 'Relationships' have historically focused on relationships with people, but this approach to learning puts equal focus on relationships with places and things too.

Take planting trees, for example. That's more than just a gardening activity, it's about strengthening a relationship with the earth and future generations.

The value that underpins the Te Whāriki curriculum, which guides most early years pedagogy and practice in New Zealand, is that children should be:

"Competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society."

(Early Child Curriculum, New Zealand Ministry of Education)



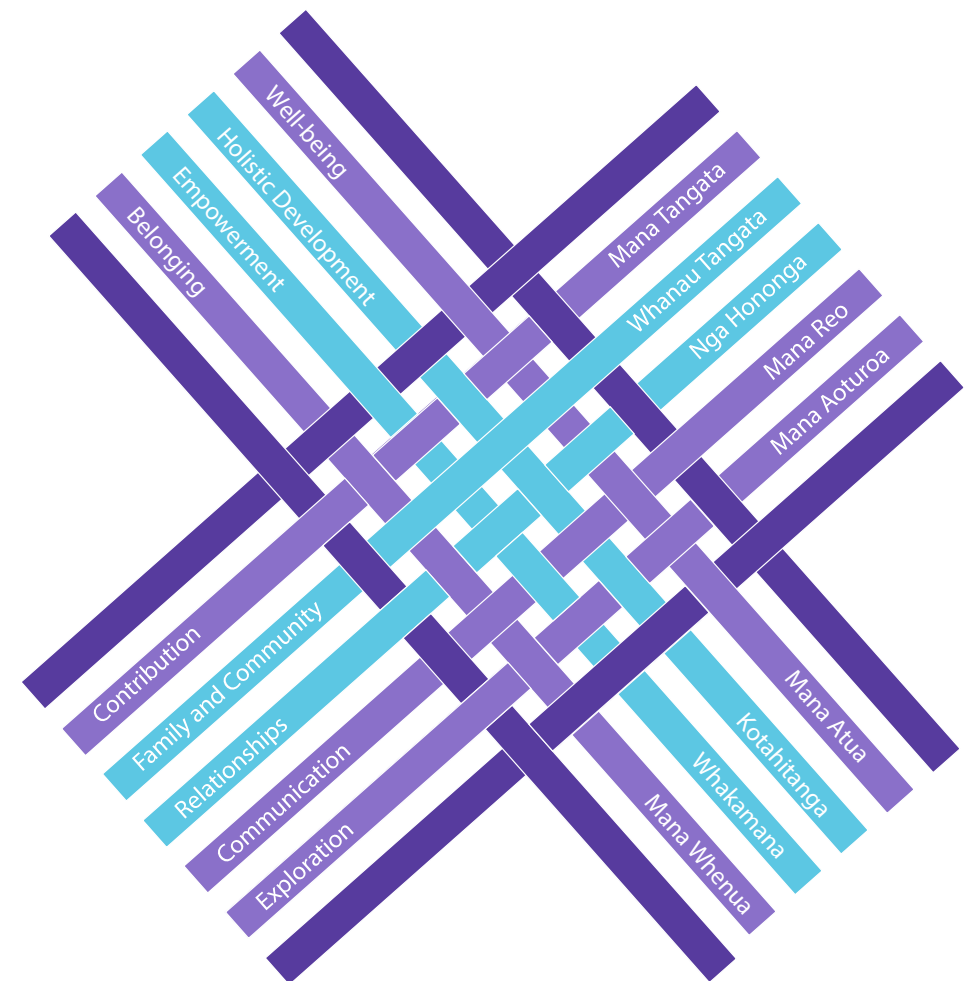
The Principles

The curriculum is built around four main principles. They are:

- **Empowerment (Whakamana)** – The curriculum empowers the child to learn and grow.
- **Holistic Development (Kotahitanga)** – The curriculum reflects the holistic way children learn and grow.
- **Family and Community (Whānau Tangata)** – The wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum.
- **Relationships (Ngā Hononga)** – Children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places, and things.

From here, there are five strands of child development which form developmental, cultural, and learning goals.

- **Well-being** – Nurture and protect the health and well-being of the child.
- **Belonging** – Children and their families feel a sense of belonging.
- **Contribution** – Opportunities for learning are equitable, and each child's contribution is valued.
- **Communication** – The languages and symbols of their own and other cultures are promoted and protected.
- **Exploration** – The child learns through active exploration of the environment.



- The principles
- The strands



How to introduce Te Whariki

Understanding a new curriculum is great, but without ideas to put it into practice, it can be difficult to feel like it's made a difference. Here's a few to get you started.

1. Learning outdoors

Belonging, Exploration



Activities outside provide opportunities for little ones to feel the breeze, crunch the leaves, and listen to raindrops landing. Are you really confident that your little ones are getting the opportunity to get in touch with nature on a regular basis?

2. Pay attention to the emotional environment

Well-being, Belonging, Contribution



So often we hear that 'children are a product of their own environment' and it's important to remember they do not touch, see, or hear passively – they feel, look, and listen actively. Pay attention to what your children instinctively enjoy.

3. Use natural resources or junk play

Belonging, Exploration, Well-being



Hands-on experiences with natural materials offer children opportunities to develop theories about how things work in the living and physical worlds. Think about materials such as shells, bark, sponges, stones, leaves, flowers, sticks, moss, rocks, pine cones, fur, or feathers.



4. Incorporate both independent and interactive play

Contribution, Communication



It's important to Te Whāriki that children play cooperatively, but they should also have a strong sense of themselves. They need opportunities to play on their own, allowing their imagination and problem-solving skills to develop as well as their physical skills.

5. Messy play

Communication, Exploration



Messy play materials provide satisfying sensory experiences that can stimulate emotional well-being and growth. Children actively explore using their bodies and all their senses, as well as the use of tools, materials and equipment.

6. Music

Belonging, Contribution, Well-being, Communication, Exploration



Music is a multi-sensory experience and activities might require children to wait their turn, listen to each other, and respond to changes in the music. Children develop a respect for one another and begin to understand the 'rules' of participation.

7. Drama

Belonging, Contribution, Well-being, Communication, Exploration



Getting your kids to use gesture and movement to express themselves is very healthy. Children develop the capability to be expressive and they can discover different ways to be creative. Drama and acting encourage children to play and learn alongside each other.



Further Reading

More on pedagogies

- [Pedagogies in early years education presentation](#) – We found this brilliant presentation online which goes into much higher depth on the meaning of pedagogy and different learning approaches.
- [Pedagogy and early learning resources](#) - A brilliant list of studies and resources from Foundation Years on pedagogy in the early years.
- [Comparing international pedagogies](#) - A great (and relatively short) report from the UK government on the UK's pedagogy, how it compares to other countries, and what we can learn.

More on forest schools

- [The Forest School Association website](#) – You'll find lots of great information on setting up a forest school and the principles behind it, including a map to find local providers and trainers near you.
- [Free level one training online](#) - Want to get a taster of forest school training? Over at this website they give you level one training online - and it's completely free.
- [More about risky play](#) - Check out our article on risky play, explaining why it's so important for child development and how to encourage more of it in your setting.

- [How to get started with in the moment planning](#) - In the moment planning is a great way to look at the planning cycle if you're going to start forest school. Check out our article on how to get started.

More on Curiosity Approach

- [The Curiosity Approach website](#) – More information on the Curiosity Approach, including reading materials on training to get going with it in your own setting.
- [Our full Curiosity Approach interview](#) - Read our full interview with Lyndsey and Stephanie, explaining the full approach and how you can get started with it.

More on Te Whāriki

- [Te Whāriki reading materials](#) – From the New Zealand Ministry of Education, this site has lots more about Te Whāriki, including materials about how they implement and assess using the curriculum.
- [The full Te Whāriki article](#) - Read our full piece on Te Whāriki, including how it ties in with our very own EYFS.



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