

FOLLOWING FASCINATIONS ACROSS HOME AND NURSERY

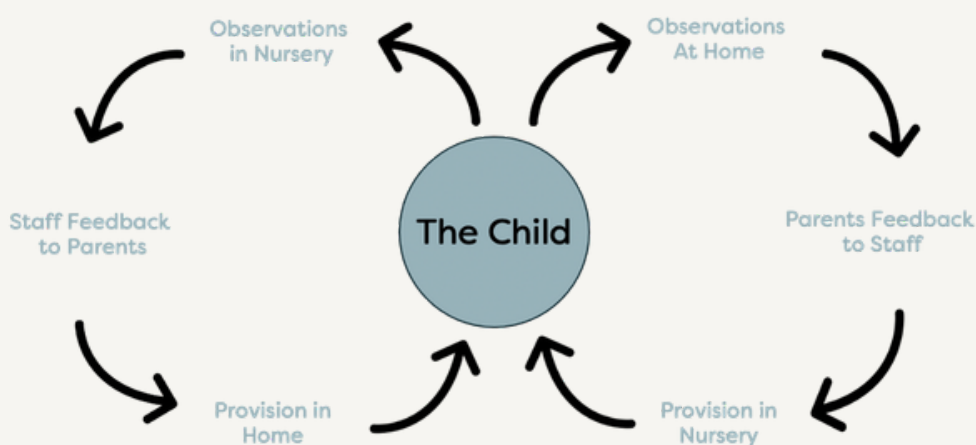
Using the Pen Green Loop to Support the Home Learning Environment

Children's learning does not begin when they arrive at nursery, nor does it stop when they go home. Every day, children move between home, early years settings and their wider community, carrying with them ideas, experiences, relationships and fascinations.

The challenge for educators is how we notice these interests, build a shared understanding with families and use this knowledge to support children's learning across both environments.



KNOWLEDGE SHARING BETWEEN FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS



At Pen Green, this understanding has been at the heart of our work with children and families for over forty years. Through our Parental Involvement in Children's Learning (PICL) approach, we recognise that parents and educators each hold valuable knowledge about children. When these different perspectives come together, they provide a much richer understanding of children's development than either could alone.

THE PEN GREEN LOOP

One of the ways this partnership is made visible is through The Pen Green Loop.

FOLLOWING FASCINATIONS ACROSS HOME AND NURSERY

Using the Pen Green Loop to Support the Home Learning Environment

WHY DOES THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT MATTER?

The importance of the Home Learning Environment is well established within the evidence base. The Education Endowment Foundation's Early Years Toolkit highlights that high-quality parental engagement can positively influence children's communication and language, self-regulation, and early literacy and numeracy development. Importantly, the evidence suggests that the most effective approaches are not those that ask parents to recreate nursery experiences at home, but those which help parents understand how children learn and recognise the learning opportunities that already exist within everyday family life.

Research also tells us that successful parental engagement is built on trusting, reciprocal relationships where educators and families learn from one another. Rather than seeing parents as recipients of advice, effective partnerships recognise them as active participants in their child's learning journey. This principle has underpinned the work of Pen Green since its earliest development.

THE PEN GREEN LOOP: KNOWLEDGE SHARING BETWEEN FAMILIES AND PROFESSIONALS

The Pen Green Loop is a dynamic process of reciprocal knowledge sharing between families and professionals.

When there is a two-way exchange of observations between home and nursery, children experience greater continuity in their learning and a more consistent approach to supporting their development. Rather than information flowing in one direction, all of the important adults in a child's life share observations, reflect together on what appears to be significant for the child, and use this shared understanding to inform future experiences.

**ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL WAYS OF
USING THE PEN GREEN LOOP IS TO FOLLOW
CHILDREN'S FASCINATIONS ACROSS
DIFFERENT CONTEXTS.**



FOLLOWING FASCINATIONS ACROSS HOME AND NURSERY

Using the Pen Green Loop to Support the Home Learning Environment

The loop begins with observations made either at home or in the setting. These observations are shared through conversations, photographs, learning stories or informal interactions. Together, parents and educators consider what the observations tell them about the child's interests, motivations, emerging theories and learning. This shared understanding then informs the experiences and opportunities offered both at home and in nursery, before new observations begin the cycle again.

At Pen Green, we recognise that families and educators bring different, but equally important, forms of knowledge.

educators contribute professional knowledge of child development, pedagogy and learning. Parents and carers bring something that cannot be replicated elsewhere: a deep understanding of their own child, developed through everyday relationships, routines and experiences. Easen, Kendall and Shaw (1992) describe this as a developmental partnership, recognising that it is through dialogue between parents and professionals that richer understandings of children's learning emerge.

As Margy Whalley describes, parents hold their own 'personal theories' about their child, whilst educators bring 'public theories' informed by research and professional knowledge. It is the interaction between these different ways of understanding children that creates the fullest picture of children's development.

The Pen Green Loop is therefore much more than a communication tool. It is a process of co-constructing knowledge about children.

FOLLOWING ELI'S FASCINATION WITH MAGNETS

The following example illustrates how the Pen Green Loop can support the Home Learning Environment by enabling educators and families to build on a child's interest across different contexts.



FOLLOWING FASCINATIONS ACROSS HOME AND NURSERY

Using the Pen Green Loop to Support the Home Learning Environment

Case Study: Eli and the Magnets

OBSERVATION AT HOME

Eli's family noticed that he had become fascinated with magnets.

Using a small toy with a magnetic belly, Eli began exploring his local community, testing what his "frog buddy" would stick to. Lamp posts, railings, shopping trolley bays and signs all became opportunities for investigation.

As they explored together, Eli began asking questions about what objects were made from and started making increasingly accurate predictions about whether they would attract his magnet.



His parent shared: "Eli has loved experimenting with where his frog buddy sticks and has started to get really good at guessing what things are made out of. If it doesn't stick, Eli tries to guess what it is made out of if not metal."

This observation revealed much more than an interest in magnets. Eli was developing ideas about materials, making predictions, testing hypotheses and trying to understand how the physical world worked. Rather than remaining an isolated observation at home, this knowledge was shared with nursery educators.

RESPONDING IN NURSERY

Recognising the significance of Eli's fascination, educators planned opportunities for him and his peers to investigate magnets further.

Children explored large magnets alongside a range of metal and non-metal objects collected from around the room. Adults introduced scientific vocabulary such as attract, repel, metal and force, supporting children to connect their practical exploration with new language.

Eli immediately returned to his investigations, spending an extended period testing objects, making predictions and experimenting with how magnets behaved.

During his exploration he commented:

"Ah, these magnets are not going together... it's pushing away!"

Together, Eli and his educator explored what happened when one magnet was turned around and discovered that the magnets would now attract one another. They continued testing spoons, keys, cars, blocks, fabrics and other everyday objects, discussing why some materials behaved differently from others.

Throughout the experience, Eli demonstrated sustained involvement, curiosity and perseverance as he refined his thinking through repeated exploration.

FOLLOWING FASCINATIONS ACROSS HOME AND NURSERY

Using the Pen Green Loop to Support the Home Learning Environment

THE LOOP IN ACTION

Viewed simply as a nursery activity, this might appear to be a science investigation.

Viewed through the Pen Green Loop, it becomes an example of how shared knowledge between home and nursery can deepen children's learning.

Without the observation from home, educators may not have recognised the significance of Eli's existing fascination. They would have seen a child enjoying magnets, but not a child who had already spent days investigating them within his community, developing theories about materials and beginning to classify the world around him.

Equally, without the nursery experience, Eli may not have encountered new scientific vocabulary or opportunities to explore his thinking alongside adults and peers.

The learning was strengthened because information flowed in both directions.

The observation from home informed nursery provision.

Nursery experiences deepened Eli's understanding and introduced new language and concepts.

These experiences could then be shared back with home, enabling Eli's family to continue noticing and extending his thinking in everyday situations.

Rather than home and nursery providing separate experiences, they became connected through shared observation and reflection.



WHAT WAS ELI LEARNING?

Through his exploration of magnets, Eli was developing:

Communication and Language

- Learning and using new scientific vocabulary.
- Explaining observations and ideas.
- Engaging in conversations about cause and effect.

Understanding the World

- Exploring materials and their properties.
- Testing theories and making predictions.
- Investigating how things work.

Characteristics of Effective Learning

- Showing curiosity and motivation.
- Maintaining concentration over extended periods.
- Having a go and testing ideas.
- Revisiting and refining thinking.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

- Building confidence as a learner.
- Experiencing the satisfaction of discovery.
- Sharing ideas and collaborating with others.

FOLLOWING FASCINATIONS ACROSS HOME AND NURSERY

Using the Pen Green Loop to Support the Home Learning Environment



WHAT CAN EDUCATORS LEARN FROM THIS?

The Pen Green Loop reminds us that supporting the Home Learning Environment is not about sending activities home for families to complete. Instead, it is about building trusting relationships that enable genuine knowledge sharing.

When educators invite parents to share what they notice at home, they gain valuable insights into children's interests, motivations and learning that would otherwise remain invisible. Likewise, when educators share their own observations and thinking, parents are supported to recognise the learning taking place within everyday experiences.

This approach closely reflects the evidence around effective parental engagement.

The Education Endowment Foundation identifies successful approaches as those that build parents' confidence, personalise support, develop trusting relationships over time and recognise learning within everyday family life.

The Pen Green Loop provides one practical way of bringing these principles to life.

REFLECTION FOR PRACTICE

As educators, we might ask ourselves:

- **How do we find out what children are deeply interested in beyond the nursery?**
- **Are we inviting parents into genuine dialogue, or simply sharing information?**
- **How do observations from home influence our planning?**
- **How often do we share our thinking back with families so learning can continue beyond the setting?**
- **Are we recognising parents as experts on their own child?**



FOLLOWING FASCINATIONS ACROSS HOME AND NURSERY

Using the Pen Green Loop to Support the Home Learning Environment

When educators and families work together to notice, interpret and respond to children's fascinations, learning becomes richer, more connected and more meaningful.

The Pen Green Loop reminds us that understanding children is a shared endeavour. By bringing together parents' personal knowledge and educators' professional knowledge, we can build a broader and more accurate picture of children's development and create continuity across the places where they learn best—at home, in nursery and within their communities.



REFERENCES

- Carr, M. & Lee, W. (2012). *Learning Stories: Constructing Learner Identities in Early Education*. Sage.
- Easen, P., Kendall, P. & Shaw, J. (1992). *Parents and Educators: Dialogue and Development Through Partnership*. *Children & Society*, 6(4), 282–296.
- Education Endowment Foundation (2025). *Early Years Toolkit – Parental Engagement*.
- Whalley, M. (2017). *Involving Parents in their Children's Learning (3rd ed.)*. Sage.
- Whalley, M., Arnold, C. & Orr, R. (2013). *Working with Families in Children's Centres and Early Years Settings*. Hodder Education.

WEBINAR: WORKING WITH PARENTS

View recorded webinar here



WEBINAR:
Working with Parents: Building
Stronger Partnerships for
Children's Learning



Evidence-Based Strategies for Building Trust,
Partnership, and Co-Constructed Learning