

# A moment to ponder...

## Intentional teaching



**Caroline Vollans** is the lead writer and editor for Sheringham's SPH. Caroline is a psychoanalyst and writer. She writes for Nursery World, family and the Foundation Stage Forum, and is author of *Wise Words: How Susan Isaacs changed parenting* (Routledge 2018) and co-editor of *Putting the EYFS Curriculum into Practice* (Sage 2023).

Intention is complex.

We may intend to support a stressed friend but leave them feeling more anxious.  
We may intend to make chewy cookies and end up with exactly that.

The outcomes of our intention may be as we hoped, quite the opposite or somewhere between the two.

We hear a lot in the early years about *intentional teaching*. Can we intend one thing and end up with another in the early years, too?

### What is intentional teaching?

Though there isn't a single definition, intentional teaching refers to when educators think about what they are doing and how it will support the child's development and learning. The nature of this approach is deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful.

### How does intentional teaching work?

- Intentional teaching is **planned**: it has a specific focus for the children's learning.

*For example, during interactive reading we may want to look at 'number'. Doing this intentionally means that we plan to focus on number, encourage the children to see it in the book and engage with it.*

*Practitioners ask questions and make comments that will enable the children to get involved with their learning about number.*

- Intentional teaching requires **spontaneity**: there is a fine balance between focussing on the learning intention and not getting fixated on it in a way that limits the child's learning.

*For example, if we are concentrating on the theme of number during interactive reading, it is also important to respond to other learning that will arise. This might be when the children notice objects that interest them or have something to say about the colours they see. Practitioners need to pick up on these learning opportunities as well the number-focussed ones.*



- **Scaffolding** works hand in hand with intentional teaching: intentional teaching may not work without scaffolding. If children are asked to do something that is beyond them, they may get frustrated or simply shut down.

*For example, rather than asking the children to do the counting, the adult may start by saying 1 and pointing to a single object, then progressing to 2 and so forth. S/he will encourage the children to join in as and when they can, repeating and reinforcing it.*

Going back to the initial question of whether intentional teaching in the early years always works out as expected, the answer has to be 'maybe'. A practitioner can have the intention of teaching the children about number through sharing a book or a play activity. By thinking intentionally, the practitioner can ensure that the child achieves the key learning in a playful or open-ended context. But sometimes, for one reason or another, things do not go to plan and it's important to tune in with the child's interest and develop their learning that way.

What is important here though is that it is not irretrievable. If an intention 'fails' (with a small f) it provides the chance to reflect and try something new ... just as we can return to the friend we unintentionally upset and try to alleviate the situation.

**By Caroline Vollans**



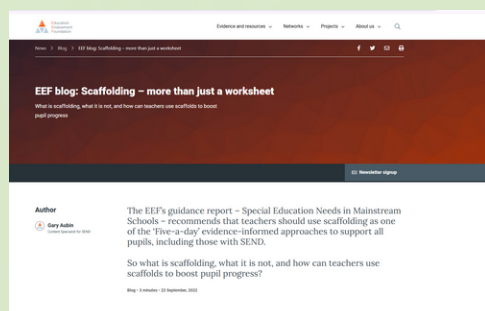
Funded by  
UK Government

A Brighter Start

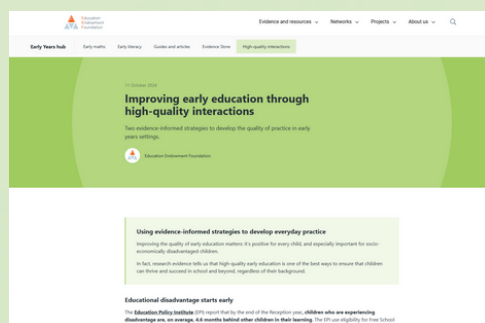
East London's Early Years  
Stronger Practice Hub

## Useful information:

EEF blog on [Scaffolding](#) by Gary Aubin (2022)



EEF guide [Improving early education through high-quality interactions](#)



National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) [Observing, Planning, Guiding: How an Intentional Teacher Meets Standards through Play](#)



Funded by  
UK Government

A Brighter Start

East London's Early Years  
Stronger Practice Hub