Thames Valley and Solent Early Years
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Exploring the Social World of Two-Year-Olds

About the AUTHOR

Dr Sharon Colilles is an Associate Professor in inclusive early childhood education at Bath Spa University. Her consultancy work is primarily concerned with social justice, equitable outcomes, and rights-based approaches for breaking down barriers to opportunity for underserved, displaced, or silenced groups of children and their families.



> **"Two-year-olds will often use their behaviours as a means for communicating their need for attention, reassurance and support'"**
>
> — Mathieson, 2013

Working with two-year-olds gives educators an amazing opportunity to view the 'world' through a different lens. The actions and behaviours of children at this age tell us that everything in the 'world' is filled with curiosity for them. Children at two can be observed to be 'gathering skills, abilities and knowledge but they are also looking to those who know more to guide them' Mathieson (*2013:27*). Considered as a period of rapid change (*EYC, 2026*) two-year-olds are changing physically and socially and more notably change can be seen in their thinking abilities. It can be argued that they experience their emotions deeply and convey them immediately. Meaning that this stage is sometimes notoriously called the terrible twos! I consider that it might be helpful to embrace Mathieson's (2013) view that being two is a unique time in a child's life, where they are continually thinking and testing out their ideas.



By age two children enter early years provision with social networks and relationships established with a range of adults, who know them well, and who will have already influenced their understanding about how the world works.

They are making neural connections between lived experiences and are forming ideas that might be interesting to them.

Two-year-olds are also more likely to pay attention to what others are doing rather than what they are saying.

They have 'unique personal identities' (Colilles, 2026:1), are rich in funds of knowledge (*Moll, 1992, Chesworth, 2016, Colilles, 2020*), and are 'active co-constructors of learning' (*EYC, 2026:48*).

When considering how to support meaningful everyday experiences that promote cultural capital for two-year-olds it might be helpful to start with questioning everyday routines and practices and their impact on children's learning.

Reflection on the relationships that have been developed with parents and carers will also need careful exploration to ensure 'all' perspectives inform the experiences that children encounter. Why? Because Parents have detailed knowledge and understanding about their children's cultural interests, so shared insights about the types of activities and resources that children are interested in will be highly beneficial for supporting planning. Paying careful attention to what children are curious about, as well as exploring their ideas with them will help educators to cocreate experiences that extend learning. Following their thinking (cultural capital) using culturally appropriate resources (Colilles, 2026) anchors learning in meaning, culture, and identity.



Offering experiences for two-year-olds to follow what is of significant value to them rather than what is meaningful to adults will support their understanding at a much deeper level. Participatory approaches also support the enthusiastic communicator who is sensitive to the feelings of others,
and who is also concerned about relationships with the people around them. Participatory experiences for ensuring inclusion and affirming children's cultural capital may mean:

- Paying careful attention to the questions two-year-olds ask – why?
- Closely observing play scenarios and peer interactions to explore how to extend children's thinking (*England, 2019*).
- Offering both familiar and unfamiliar artefacts in different ways to help children build positive connections with their sense of self, belonging and understanding.
- Providing familial resources that reflect children's homes, cultures and families, helping them feel connected and represented.
- Paying more attention to the process rather than the outcome of planned experiences (*England, 2019*).

Rooted in Vygotskian (1978) social construction theory the importance of relationships cannot be underestimated for the two-year-old. They are active communicators, keen observers of others, and can be seen to imitate the actions of adults (as well as peers). Their ability to recognise the needs of others however can fluctuate and may be outweighed by their own needs. Hence extended social interaction can be difficult creating a need for quiet spaces to withdraw to within provision.

Reciprocity in carefully considered and trusting relationships serves as a vehicle for helping two-year olds who are being and becoming themselves (*EYC, 2026:48*).

Conclusion

This blog has focused on how the early years educator can facilitate meaningful everyday experiences for promoting two-year-olds cultural capital. Birth to Five Matters guidance helpfully recommends provision needs to offer 'predictable but flexible routines that help [children at this age] to manage being part of a community' (EYC, 2026:54). Two-year olds are still commonly misunderstood by adults (as well as their peers) because they 'express themselves through physical behaviours, all of which are communications about their feelings and what they need' (EYC, 2026:49).

I conclude by asking educators to recognise that two-year-olds flourish when they have responsive, empathetic relationships with key people who understand the challenges of simply 'being two'!



Key Takeaways:

- A key characteristic of the two-year olds is the changeability (*EYC, 2026:49*). Does the environment (displays) support the important learning you are scaffolding about behaviour and social understanding in the room?
- Two years olds need larger, quicker, less constrained movement to enable coordination and dexterity to increase, '*they play to move and move to play*', (*EYC, 2026:48*). Does planning provide opportunities for extended periods of time learning in the outdoors?
- Playing alongside two years olds supports the educator to encourage and extend children's current abilities and thinking.
- Educators should give 'time' and 'attention' to understand how the two-year-old interacts with the 'world'. This is the phase where educators will observe the most significant changes in physical, emotional and communication development - They are driven to share their ideas with others.
    - Is there reciprocity in your Parent partnerships – a two-way process of information sharing? • Do your provisions 'culturally appropriate resources' enable children to think about who they are and how they make meaning of the world around them?

Reflective Question:

How do you support the emotional and social rollercoaster as two-year-olds navigate hard to understand experiences?

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- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Process. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Useful Resources

All articles accessed July 2026.

- Early Years Coalition (2026) Birth to Five Matters: non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage, 2nd Edn. Birth To 5 Matters – Guidance by the sector, for the sector.
- The Froebel Trust, https://www.froebel.org.uk/

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