Tyneside Early Years Stronger Practice Hub



Kerry Marshall is an Early Years Lead at West Walker Primary School in the East End of Newcastle.

Kerry has worked as an Early Years Lead across a 2-5 year olds provision for six years now.

Using explicit teaching of social skills to strengthen transitions into Reception

Transitions in Early Years are often a key topic of discussion. As the Department for Education's (DfE) guidance emphasises:

"Getting it right for children at this stage is vital... A smooth transition is essential for building children's confidence, self-esteem, and emotional well-being."

We worked hard from early in the spring term to ensure we had a robust plan in place to support our children and families ahead of transition. However, one of our daily Nursery routines emerged as an unexpected gamechanger.

Last academic year, our setting participated in the **Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) trial of the 'Plan, Do, Review' project.** The approach aims to support communication, language and thinking skills in children aged three to four by encouraging them to lead conversations, think critically, listen actively and respond

appropriately to others. It is designed to help children organise and communicate their thoughts, ideas and feelings.

We embraced the project in its entirety and quickly noticed positive changes in children's confidence when communicating with their peers and adults. As the year progressed, one area that particularly stood out to us was the development of children's social communication skills.

Making social skills explicit

Through our daily routines across each phase of Plan, Do, Review, we explicitly taught children the vocabulary and behaviours needed for successful social interactions. This aligned closely with EEF guidance on social communication, which highlights that:

"Approaches that support the physical and social aspects of communication, such as explicitly teaching and modelling social communication skills, help children build positive relationships and express their needs."

This structured approach gave our Nursery children practical tools to:

- express opinions, preferences and feelings;
- communicate boundaries confidently;
- build reciprocal relationships through meaningful back-and-forth conversations;
- negotiate play ideas, share resources and solve minor disagreements.

Initially, these interactions were heavily supported through adult modelling and guidance. Over time, however, we began to observe children using this language independently during child-initiated play.

The impact in Reception

Even early in the new academic year, we have continued to notice these behaviours within our reception cohort. The quality of children's interactions during play has been particularly striking.

Without adult intervention, many children are able to:

- share their opinions and express their feelings;
- build narratives collaboratively during play;
- negotiate roles and ideas with their peers;

- communicate boundaries calmly using phrases such as, "I don't like that" or "stop".

Of course, adult modelling and support continue to play an important role as children develop. However, we have observed many children drawing on the language and strategies introduced through Plan, Do, Review to navigate social interactions more independently.

As practitioners, we often think about transition in terms of routines, environments and independence skills. These remain important, but our experience has highlighted the value of explicitly teaching social communication too. Giving children the language to express themselves, negotiate with others and manage everyday social situations appears to provide a strong foundation as they move into Reception.

Looking beyond Nursery

It would be difficult to attribute these outcomes to one approach alone. However, we believe that embedding Plan, Do, Review within Nursery has helped equip children with valuable social communication tools that continue to support them beyond the Nursery year.

Looking back, one of the most powerful aspects of the approach was not simply providing opportunities for children to talk but explicitly teaching them how to communicate with others: how to share ideas, listen, negotiate, disagree respectfully and advocate for themselves.

As we watch this cohort settle into Reception, we are reminded that these skills are about much more than transition. They are laying foundations for children's future learning, relationships and communication.

References:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69df95d36c6ccf244be42d8c/Getting_children_ready_for_reception_-_how_schools_and_early_years_settings_can_work_together_with_families_to_support_transition_into_reception.pdf

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/plan-do-review-pilot

https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/evidence-store/personal-social-and-emotional-development/social-communication-skills