



Still learning to walk, Leila negotiates the uneven terrain of the nursery garden while holding Carol's hand. She sees the other children playing

with the wind chimes at the playhouse and indicates that she wants to do the same, so Carol lifts her up to hit the chimes with a stick.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# Tuning in

Young children with developmental delay will benefit from the care of a practitioner who responds to them as they are now, says *Anne O'Connor*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

Leila is two years ten months old and comes to playgroup for a few mornings each week. She is well settled and has a close relationship with Carol, one of the practitioners.

Leila was born prematurely and has some delayed progress. She is just starting to walk and relies on Carol to help her make the most of her time at nursery, especially in the garden.

She loves to walk around holding Carol's hand, watching and noticing what the other children are doing. The uneven ground in the nursery garden presents her with quite a physical challenge, but thanks to Carol's help she is able to negotiate her way around and to follow her own interests.

Leila notices the children playing at the little house. They are using sticks to reach up to rattle the wind chime, and Leila shows Carol she wants to join in and have a go by pointing up at the chime. Carol gives her a stick, but she is just too short to reach. Carol lifts her up and Leila has



the satisfaction of being able to do it just the same as the others.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

**Carol's support is very important for Leila's progress.**

She is so well tuned into Leila that she is able to recognise the little shifts in her body that indicate which direction she wants to go in and what activities interest her.

Carol knows when to help her and

when to stand back and let her try things for herself. Leila also knows what she can attempt by herself and when she needs help, and is secure in the knowledge that Carol will provide exactly what she needs.

Leila is beginning to use words to indicate what she wants, but Carol also knows her body language well and responds to her gestures and pointing. She not only understands Leila's physical needs at this stage, she also has a confident awareness of her developmental progress. She is able to meet Leila 'where she is at' and take her development forward when appropriate.

To be able to respond to Leila's needs in the way that a responsive parent would, a practitioner has to be very well tuned in, as Carol is, and be able to recognise the subtleties of the child's verbal and non-verbal communication as well as knowing how their particular disability or developmental delay impacts on them.

**2 Leila clearly loves being outside.**

It gives her the opportunity to have enough space to feel safe from the bustle of other active bodies around her, while also being able to watch and observe them.

Many of the structures in the garden, like benches and tree stumps, are just at the right height to allow her to practise pulling herself up to a standing position. She then has something to hold on to while she explores the things that interest her.

She can crawl along the grass and through play tunnels, practising the co-ordination that is so important for brain building. Being able to crawl around also gives her more independence from Carol, as she is still wobbly on her feet.

The outdoors does present her with lots of physical challenges, however, which is why Carol's presence is so important. She has to engage with the variety of surfaces found in the garden and this builds her sensory development, just as it does with a younger child learning to walk.

**3 The developmental progress of children born prematurely varies just as much as it does with babies born to term.**

It can depend on the cause and degree of prematurity, but for many children, there are few health and developmental issues by the time they reach school age. However, it is important that we do not underestimate the potential impact that premature birth may have on different aspects of a child's development.

The advice is that for at least the first year, prematurely-born babies should be developmentally assessed by their age calculated from their due date, rather than their chronological age calculated from the date of actual birth. This is because they need to be allowed to make up for the development time that they missed in the womb.

EPiCure is a research programme

(originally based at the University of Nottingham, now at University College London) working on important long-term 'population-based studies of survival and later health status in extremely premature infants'. The research began with children who were born in 1995 and were then followed up again at various ages and most recently, when they reached 11 years of age.

The aim of the research was 'to find out what kinds of problems extremely premature children may have later in life so that we can work out the best ways for helping them overcome them'. It has found that 'the number of children with learning difficulties was much the same as when we assessed the children at six years of age, and that at 11 years around two-thirds of children needed some extra help in school.'

The EPiCure team says that 'given the high number of children with learning needs, it is important that teachers understand more about the problems that premature children face (not just the extremely premature ones), and we are analysing the results of a survey to see what teachers need to know to see if we can improve how children do at school.'

One particular issue the team has noted is that children who were born prematurely in the summer often end up starting school a year earlier than if they had been born on their due date. It is possible that for some of these children, it would be reasonable to consider a delay to starting school.

**REFERENCE AND FURTHER READING**

- [www.thinkbaby.co.uk/labour-and-birth/premature-babies-how-they-develop/1368.html](http://www.thinkbaby.co.uk/labour-and-birth/premature-babies-how-they-develop/1368.html)
- [www.epicure.ac.uk/parents-newsletters/december-20102](http://www.epicure.ac.uk/parents-newsletters/december-20102)
- [www.bliss.org.uk](http://www.bliss.org.uk) 'for babies born too soon, too small, too sick'
- Jan White, *Playing and Learning Outdoors – Making provision for high quality experiences in the outdoor environment* (Routledge 2008)

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Two-Year-Olds Outdoors – Play, Learning and Development'. For more information, visit Siren Films at [www.sirenfilms.co.uk](http://www.sirenfilms.co.uk) or call 0191 232 7900

**4 Leila's needs are currently well met by her playgroup, which is able to offer an inclusive environment with appropriate attuned support.**

For Leila, being included means more than just being accommodated in the setting. Being lifted up so that she can play with the wind chime is a small but telling example of what inclusive practice really means.

Leila is out in the garden following her own interests, just the same as the other children. She sees the other children doing something that she is motivated to try for herself, but is currently unable to do without help.

By recognising that she needs lifting up, Carol makes the appropriate 'reasonable adjustments' that are required so that Leila can join in the activity on her own terms.

Those 'reasonable adjustments' will no doubt differ and change as Leila grows older, but they may well continue to be important if she is to have the same 'fair' chances as other children, to pursue and achieve her own interests and potential. ■



**LINKS TO THE EYFS**

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **UC 1.2** Inclusive Practice
- **PR 2.3** Supporting Learning
- **PR 2.4** Key Person
- **EE 3.3** The Learning Environment
- **L&D 4.1** Play and Exploration