

Understanding Typical Child Development SCRIPT

“Welcome to Session 1 of our **Child Development, Assessment and Knowing Every Child** series.

Across this series, we're going to explore how we build a genuinely useful picture of children's development — not through endless paperwork or ticking boxes, but through knowing children exceptionally well.

And we're beginning with the foundation for all of that:

understanding typical child development.

As Early Years practitioners, we need a strong understanding of how children generally develop. It helps us recognise what children may be ready for, identify emerging needs and make informed decisions about what might help next.

But there is an important tension here.

We need to know developmental pathways **without expecting every child to follow exactly the same path at exactly the same time.**

So throughout today's session, we're going to keep coming back to one key idea:

Developmental knowledge gives us a guide. The individual child tells us the story.

Our job is to understand both.”

Slide 2 – Safeguarding Spark

“Let's begin, as always, with our Safeguarding Spark.

The scenario is:

You notice a child has suddenly lost skills they previously demonstrated confidently, including language and social interaction. What is the most appropriate response?

Take a moment to consider the options.

Would we simply encourage the child to practise those skills more often?

Assume it's a developmental phase and wait a few months?

Compare the child with others before deciding whether we're concerned?

Or record what we've observed, discuss it with the SENCO and DSL and work in partnership with parents to understand the change?

The most important word in this scenario is **suddenly.**

Children's development naturally varies. But when we notice a significant **change from a child's own previous presentation**, that deserves our attention.

We are not asking, ‘Is this child doing exactly what other children of the same age are doing?’

We're asking:

‘What has changed for this child?’”

Slide 3 – Safeguarding Spark: Answer

“The correct response is **C**:

Record your observations, discuss them with the SENCO and DSL and work in partnership with parents to understand the change.

We don't diagnose the reason ourselves.

We don't make assumptions.

And importantly, we don't simply wait and hope that the skills return.

A loss of previously established skills can be significant, particularly when we're seeing changes across areas such as language and social interaction.

Our role is to notice what is different, record factual observations and follow the appropriate procedures within our setting.

For example, rather than writing:

‘Child has regressed,’

we should record what we have actually observed.

Perhaps:

‘Child previously regularly initiated conversations with peers. Over the past week, they have spoken very little during child-initiated play and have spent prolonged periods playing alone.’

That gives colleagues useful information.

This is why knowing children matters so much.

Developmental knowledge helps us recognise patterns, but knowing the individual child helps us recognise **change.**”

Slide 4 – The Journey Ahead

“Let's look at where we're going across this six-week series.

Today, we're beginning with **Understanding Typical Child Development.**

Next week, we'll explore **Observation That Matters.**

Then we'll look at **Assessment Without Creating Workload.**

Week 4 focuses on **Identifying Children Who Need Additional Support.**

Week 5 explores **Working with Parents as Partners.**

And finally, we'll look at **Using Assessment to Inform Provision.**

There's a deliberate journey here.

Before we can assess children meaningfully, we need to understand development.

Before we can identify additional needs confidently, we need to observe well.

And before assessment can improve outcomes, we need to use what we know to influence provision.

So throughout this series, we're moving away from the idea that assessment is something we **produce** and towards the idea that assessment is something we **use.**

Ultimately, everything should help us answer one question:

Slide 5 – Success Criteria

“By the end of today's session, there are three things we're aiming to achieve.

Firstly, understand why knowledge of child development underpins outstanding Early Years practice.

Secondly, explore the difference between **typical development and individual variation**.

And finally, reflect on how our understanding of development helps us meet every child's needs.

That second point is particularly important.

The word **typical** can sometimes be misunderstood as meaning:

‘This is what every child should be doing at this exact age.’

That's not what we're saying.

Developmental knowledge helps us understand patterns and pathways.

But individual children bring different experiences, temperaments, strengths and needs.

So today isn't about memorising a long list of milestones.

It's about becoming more confident in using developmental knowledge **alongside what we know about the individual child.**”

Slide 6 – Why This Matters

“Every decision we make begins with understanding the child in front of us.

When we understand child development, we're better able to recognise what children may be ready for.

We can identify when additional support might be needed.

We can plan experiences that are appropriately challenging.

We can avoid unrealistic expectations.

And importantly, we can recognise and celebrate genuine progress.

Imagine two children of the same age.

One may confidently tell elaborate stories but find fine-motor tasks difficult.

Another may be physically confident and independent but use much less spoken language.

Their date of birth tells us very little about what each child needs from us tomorrow morning.

That's why developmental knowledge should never replace professional curiosity about the child.

As the slide says:

Knowledge of child development helps us respond to children — not simply to age expectations.

That distinction is at the heart of today's session.”

Slide 7 – What Does the Research Say?

“Research consistently tells us that children develop across broadly similar developmental pathways, but development itself is not linear.

Progress doesn't look the same for every child.

Strengths and needs differ.

And children may make rapid progress in one area while appearing to consolidate learning in another.

Think about development less like climbing a perfectly straight staircase and more like a complex journey.

There may be bursts of progress.

Periods of consolidation.

Areas that develop quickly.

And others that take longer.

The EYFS reminds us that every child is unique.

That means developmental milestones are useful, but only when we use them intelligently.

They're there to help us **notice patterns**, not label children.

We should be very cautious about reducing a complex child to:

‘They're behind.’

A far more useful professional conversation is:

‘What are we noticing? What can this child already do? What appears to be emerging? And what might help next?’”

Slide 8 – Development Is Not a Race

“Imagine three children learning to walk.

One walks at 10 months.

Another at 14 months.

Another at 17 months.

As the slide reminds us, each may be developing typically.

Yet if we viewed development as a race, we might immediately decide that the first child was ‘ahead’ and the third child was ‘behind’.

That language can be unhelpful because development is much more complex than a finishing line.

Children are developing cognitively, linguistically, socially, physically and emotionally — often at different rates.

A child may have extremely sophisticated language but still need significant support with emotional regulation.

Another may be physically very confident but communicate in shorter sentences.

One area doesn't tell us everything about the child.

So rather than constantly asking:

‘Where is this child compared with everybody else?’

we need to ask:

‘What is this child's developmental picture telling me?’

The line on the slide summarises it perfectly:

Comparison rarely helps. Understanding does.”

Slide 9 – Development Is Interconnected

“No area of development exists in isolation.

And this is really important when we're trying to understand why a child may be finding something difficult.

Take communication.

Strong communication can support literacy, friendships, emotional regulation and thinking.

Similarly, physical development influences children's later ability to write.

Emotional security influences whether children feel ready and able to engage in learning.

And language influences almost everything.

So imagine a child who appears to struggle during collaborative play.

We might initially think:

‘This is a social development issue.’

But perhaps the child doesn't yet have the language needed to negotiate with peers.

Or perhaps emotional regulation is making it difficult for them to cope when play doesn't go their way.

Development is interconnected.

That means when we support one area effectively, we often strengthen others too.

We need to look at the **whole child**, rather than treating developmental areas as separate boxes.”

Slide 10 – Development Through Observation

“So how do we really understand where a child is developmentally?

We observe.

As the slide says:

We don't understand children by ticking boxes. We understand children by noticing.

Ask yourself:

What fascinates this child?

What are they confident doing?

What do they avoid?

How do they communicate?

How do they solve problems?

Those questions tell us far more than simply asking whether a child can demonstrate a particular skill on demand.

Imagine a child who doesn't respond when we ask them to count objects during an adult-led activity.

If that's all we observe, we might conclude that they can't count.

But later, during construction, we hear them independently saying:

'I need three more blocks — one, two, three.'

That's valuable assessment information because we've seen the skill being used meaningfully and independently.

Observation allows children to show us what they know in authentic contexts.

Observation tells us far more than assumptions ever will."

Slide 11 – Typical Doesn't Mean Identical

"Development guidance helps us recognise what children **often** do at different stages.

The important word there is **often**.

It should never become a checklist that we're racing children through.

We don't want practice to become:

'They've done that one. Tick. Now let's get them to do the next one.'

Instead, the question on the slide is much more useful:

'What is this child showing me today?'

Perhaps they're repeatedly transporting objects.

Perhaps they're becoming fascinated by rhyme.

Perhaps they're beginning to negotiate more complex play with friends.

Perhaps they're suddenly asking endless 'why' questions.

Those observations tell us something about where the child's thinking and development are moving.

Children don't all arrive at the same destination by the same route.

Our role is not to force everyone onto an identical pathway.

Our role is to understand the journey."

Slide 12 – Watch It in Action

"For this part of the session, we're going to focus on one child during child-initiated play.

And rather than beginning with a checklist of what we expect to see, begin with curiosity.

Ask yourself:

What skills are emerging?

Which Characteristics of Effective Learning can I see?

What strengths can I identify?

And:

Where might gentle support help next?

Notice that we're deliberately looking for strengths and emerging learning before identifying what is missing.

The presentation suggests resources from Birth to 5 Matters, Early Excellence, the EEF and Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs.

Whichever example you use, watch the child rather than the activity.

Try to notice the things that could easily be missed.

How long do they persist?

What do they do when something goes wrong?

Do they seek help?

Do they change strategy?

Do they communicate their thinking?

Good observation isn't simply recording what happened.

It's trying to understand **what the behaviour tells us about the child's learning and development.**"

Slide 13 – Looking Beyond the Milestones

"For today's reflection activity, work with colleagues and choose one child you know well.

Then begin with this question:

What are this child's greatest strengths?

That's deliberate.

We don't begin with gaps.

We begin by recognising competence.

Then ask:

What motivates them?

What progress have they made recently?

What developmental knowledge helps explain what we're seeing?

And finally:

What might be the next small step?

That sequence changes the nature of assessment conversations.

Imagine instead beginning with:

'What can't this child do yet?'

Immediately, our view of the child becomes deficit-focused.

But when we begin with strengths and motivation, we're much better placed to identify a next step that is realistic, meaningful and connected to the individual child.

The reminder on the slide is therefore important:

The conversation should begin with strengths — not gaps.”

Slide 14 – Reflection

“This slide gives us perhaps the central reflection question for the whole session:

Do I know my children... or do I know developmental milestones?

Outstanding practitioners know both.

We need developmental knowledge.

Without it, it becomes difficult to recognise whether something we're observing is significant or to identify appropriate next steps.

But knowing milestones alone is not enough.

We need to know **this child**.

Their interests.

Their relationships.

Their communication.

Their experiences.

Their confidence.

Their strengths.

Their patterns of behaviour.

The slide gives us a really helpful analogy:

Developmental knowledge provides the map. Observation tells us where each child is on their journey.

A map is useful.

But it doesn't tell you exactly where somebody is standing.

We need both pieces of information.

That is what enables assessment to become genuinely responsive rather than simply procedural.”

Slide 15 – Know the Child

“This week's practical challenge is our **Know the Child** activity.

Choose just **one child**.

And complete four prompts.

Firstly:

What are they brilliant at?

Be specific.

Secondly:

What genuinely interests or motivates them?

Not what we wish they were interested in — what actually captures their attention?

Thirdly:

What is their next realistic developmental step?

The word **realistic** matters.

We're not looking for the next box on a checklist. We're asking what small progression would make sense for this child now.

And finally:

What can I do differently this week to help them achieve it?

That last question turns assessment into action.

Perhaps you'll change a resource.

Model some language.

Create a new opportunity.

Give more thinking time.

Join their play differently.

Or simply observe more carefully.

Then finish with the reflection on the slide:

'Children don't need us to know everything about child development. They need us to use what we know about child development to understand them better.'

That's the small tweak for this week:

one child, one realistic next step, one deliberate change in adult practice."

Slide 16 – Evidence & Closing Thought

"Today's session draws on **Birth to 5 Matters**, **Development Matters**, the **Education Endowment Foundation** and its **Preparing for Literacy** guidance.

But I want to finish by returning to the central message of the session.

Understanding typical development matters.

It gives us professional knowledge.

It helps us notice patterns.

It helps us recognise when we may need to look more closely.

And it helps us make sensible decisions about what might come next.

But children are not developmental checklists.

They are individuals.

So as you move through the week, try to resist asking only:

'What should a child of this age be doing?'

Instead, add another question:

‘What is this child showing me?’

Then bring those two pieces of knowledge together.

Because knowing child development helps us understand what might be typical.

Knowing the child helps us understand what is meaningful.

And when we combine the two, assessment becomes far more powerful.

It stops being about proving where children are.

It becomes about understanding them well enough to know **what they need from us next.”**