

Geography in the Early Years: Guidance for doing wonderful and effective geography with young pupils

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This guidance is rooted in the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (DfE, 2021) and has been written to help practitioners develop in young pupils a keen interest in, and desire to learn about, the world in which we live. The guidance supports practitioners in identifying those early strands of geographical thinking and in tandem with the Geographical Association’s forthcoming *Framework for the School Geography Curriculum for Children aged 5–19* it ‘highlights the big ideas, structures and significant features of the geographical discipline that should lie behind curriculum-making at national level’ (GA, forthcoming).

Early geography matters

The Early Years comprise a vitally important developmental stage in which pupils begin a lifelong journey of discovery. All later learning builds on the experiences, knowledge and understanding developed through and in, Early Years settings. A ‘geographical dimension’ to learning at any time contributes to pupils’ sense of who they are and how they are a part of the wider world, but is especially important in the Early Years. Geography ensures a global perspective, fosters a sustainable mindset, and empowers agency.

Providing, resourcing, and teaching a curriculum where pupils’ curiosity, discovery and learning can flourish in all areas of learning is crucial, as is recognising the value that geography brings to cognitive and affective development.

‘While children have an innate sense of wonder and awe and a natural desire for enquiry, curiosity on its own is not enough. The guidance of a thoughtful and intentional practitioner is essential to enable children to maximise their learning through free explorations, focused explorations, and enquiry-based learning opportunities’ (Thompson, 2016).

Developing knowledge

Identifying and grasping geography’s key concepts in the Early Years in accessible ways ensure secure foundations for later geographical learning. These early conceptual underpinnings can then lead

to the wider understanding of geographical concepts as outlined in the *Framework for the School Geography Curriculum for Children aged 5–19* (GA, forthcoming) and exemplified in Figure 1.

For example, pupils may first encounter water through messy and exploratory play, developing essential enquiry skills, vocabulary and ideas through play and story. They may visit a local stream or lake and recreate what they have learned from models. These early ideas are then refined throughout the primary years (Figure 2).

‘A clearly mapped journey starting in the Early Years and developing through the curriculum is crucial if pupils are to move towards becoming experts in the subject’ (Ofsted, 2021).

Substantive knowledge	Disciplinary knowledge
The World Around Us <i>A focus on developing geographical vocabulary and learning about the world through first-hand experience, stories and play</i>	Guiding curiosity and experience: through concepts of place, space, environment, and scale
	Guiding curiosity and experience: through exploratory play
	Guiding curiosity and experience: through decision-making and doing

Figure 1: Developing knowledge. After: GA, forthcoming.

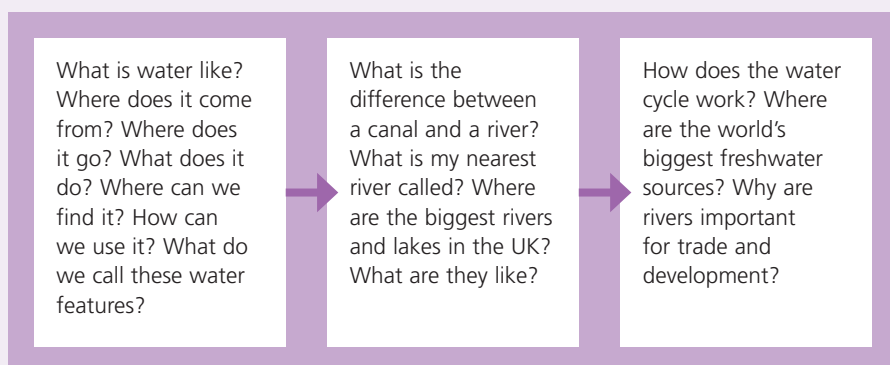


Figure 2: From early ideas to upper KS2.

What can geography do for the young pupil?

Geography offers a particular and unique way of thinking about the world: it has its own identity yet offers relevant and meaningful context and synergy within a curriculum.

A geographical lens can also provide a real-world context for other subject ideas and skill sets. For example, it might draw on mathematics to measure and compare, English to describe, and science to name and classify. Geography combines cognitive and affective thinking about the world in spatial contexts, continually making connections between the living and physical worlds. It also, importantly, helps develop feelings of belonging. Geographical thinking is complimentary to all areas of learning in the Early Years, particularly that relating to personal and social development.

'In "doing geography" with the child... one is in a humble way facilitating the child's very personal development of self-identity which will shape much of their lives, their values, sense of belonging and self-worth' (Spencer, 2005, p.305).

Geography:

- nurtures pupils' senses, engages their emotions, and develops a sense of place and belonging
- highlights the wonder in the everyday, an appreciation of the world and how to help look after it
- taps into, and fuels, pupils' love of adventure and exploration
- invites imaginative thought about places unseen and futures not yet experienced
- helps pupils make sense of the world and themselves in relation to it
- empowers pupils with agency through meaningful enquiry and participation
- taps into the power of the 'here and now' and everyday experiences to develop pupils' cultural capital
- develops vitally important spatial, personal, social and other communication skills through invitations for mapmaking, wayfinding, and placemaking.

'From the early years, the geography content that children learn can allow greater awareness of people, the environment, the relationships between them

and the child's place in this relationship. This sense of belonging is recognised as being significant in children's social and emotional development and in preparing them for more formal learning' (Ofsted, 2021).

Children as geographers

Geography speaks directly to children's curiosity, wonder and concern for the world around them, and with their innate sense of exploration, children are naturally inclined to be geographers from an early age. In their early sensory investigations and physical negotiations of space, young children effectively find out about the world around them, developing their own perceptions and priorities that may differ to those of older children and adults.

'To a three- or four-year-old, 'landscape' is not backdrop or wallpaper, it is a medium, teeming with opportunity and volatile in its textures' (Macfarlane, 2015, p.315).

Young children:

- are naturally curious
- have an innate affinity for the natural world
- explore places in terms of activity potential; doing rather than noticing
- seek to make sense of their surroundings
- want to communicate what they know and think.

- **Belonging...** helping pupils to appreciate being with and in the world
- **Resilience...** helping pupils to become confident, yet safe, risk-takers
- **Enquiry...** building on pupils' curiosity with enquiry tools
- **Empathy...** teaching pupils to listen to, and think about, other stories and experiences
- **Responsibility...** supporting pupils to use geographical knowledge and thinking to take decisions and act with care
- **Relationships...** helping pupils to be mindful of sustainable interactions with people, places and environments

Figure 3: Developing the qualities of young geographers.

We can build on children's early inclinations by focusing on some of the essential qualities that help children view the world through a geographical lens (Figure 3).

What does geography look like within Early Years practice?

Geography in the Early Years involves guiding pupils to make sense of their world, through opportunities to explore, observe, and find out about people, places, technology, and the environment; noticing, and having time to recreate, simple patterns and processes in the world around them as they do so.

'Guiding children's curiosity about the places where they live, play, and learn is at the heart of all high-quality Early Years practice' (Head teacher, Helen Martin, 2022).

A combination of enabling environments and supportive practitioners helps pupils develop their early understanding of some of geography's key concepts, such as place, space, scale, environment, interconnections, and change; the latter signifying both spatial and temporal changes in places and the processes that happen there. For example, noticing and exploring sunny and shady parts of the playground and what happens when it rains. Although geography is located within the Area of Learning entitled 'Understanding the World', it links to, and is supported by, the other Areas of Learning in the EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2021).

'Children's learning gains in any one area support ongoing development in other areas of their development' (OECD, 2020).

From birth to five, children's understanding of the world expands, starting from themselves and feeding their curiosity about their wider world. Children broaden their geographical understanding through a range of experiences and deepen their understanding through repeated opportunities in varying contexts, for example, noticing the same tree or revisiting a familiar route, at different times of the day, week and year,

'Through interactions with the environment and each other, children develop geo-literacy skills, become empowered, and see themselves as capable social beings' (Brillante and Mankiw, 2015, p. 2).

Thinking through concepts

Geographical enquiry is underpinned by geographical concepts: place, space, scale, environment, change and making connections. Early Years geography includes asking and finding the answers to questions underpinned by a growing awareness and understanding of these key geographical concepts (Figure 4).

Enabling environments

An inspiring and enabling environment is crucial. Outdoor experiences challenge and foster curiosity and exploration through play, creativity and risk-taking, while resources such as story and non-fiction books, maps, globes, photographs and other media bolster pupils' understanding of our culturally, socially, technologically, and ecologically diverse world. Pupils should be able to see themselves and their identities reflected in their environment, such as through images of family, local community, and through cultural artifacts. Enabling environments could include a gathering of the provocations and invitations listed in Figure 5.

'Research shows that outdoor learning has positive impacts on children's physical and emotional health, on their educational achievement and on their social and interpersonal skills' (Tanner, 2017, p.17).



Figure 4: Thinking through concepts. Photo © Helen Castle.

Supportive practitioners

The practitioner role is essential in harnessing pupils' interests and bringing focus to spatial elements within their everyday activities. This is a 'complex and nuanced role where adults might spontaneously begin or join in with pupils' spatial exploration or use spatial words and gestures in context to encourage pupils to engage in spatial reasoning' (ECMG, 2021).

Supportive practitioners foster pupils' early geographical learning by:

- facilitating play and curiosity
- developing awe and wonder about the world (see Figure 6)
- building on pupils' own lived experiences
- responding to pupils' interests by planning in the moment, for example: going outside to investigate birdsong
- observing how pupils interact with spaces and planning new opportunities to extend their experience when they are ready
- encouraging pupils to imagine and speculate about people, place, and environments
- using and developing geographical vocabulary to name, describe, locate, compare, and ask questions about the world
- sharing multiple stories of people and places - ensuring a balance of gender and diversity.
- helping pupils to notice what places are like and how they are changing
- providing indoor and outdoor spaces that encourage pupils to explore, change and interact with their surroundings
- providing and modelling the use of spatial artifacts such as maps and globes
- noticing and discussing how people use space in different ways, for example: how pupils use the playground for different activities
- using the same and different routes to and from a familiar place or landmark, comparing distance, time, direction.

- Walks, routes and trails
- Explorations of built and natural environments
- Spaces for den-making, place-making
- Geographical drifts to focus attention
- Stories and other media of people and places, that challenge stereotypical thinking
- Sensory tables of natural and found objects
- Identification charts for flora and fauna
- Opportunities to explore textures and a variety of materials, including sand and water play
- Equipment for different types of weather, such as wellies and waterproofs
- Geography detective equipment – notebooks, magnifying glasses, compasses and cameras
- A variety of diagrams, maps, aerial images (oblique aerial images), globes and atlases
- Small world play.



Figure 5: Activities for enabling environments. Photos © Jade Morgan (top) and Abi Flashman.



Figure 6: Skills to make sense of the world.

Planning provision for spatial skills

Suggestions for supporting the early development of spatial skills:

- Frequent opportunities for pupils to represent their spatial knowledge through maps.
- Regular opportunities to use and talk about maps, when finding places, or talking about journeys and holidays.
- Careful and repeated observation of the local area. Familiar walks develop deeper engagement.
- Visit and talk about and/or record landmarks. Pupils are supported to identify landmarks they like and think matter, are able to stop to take photographs, sketch, map and ask questions.
- Pupils are encouraged to use and explore places through sensory interactions. Using the senses, for example touching tree bark, helps pupils remember what they have seen and experienced and supports map-making.
- Using language of proximity and direction in relation to landmarks, e.g. next to that large oak tree.
- Using relational language to help pupils describe 'where', e.g. before, after, next to, inside etc.
- Opportunities for group maps so that pupils can discuss and agree on where to put things.

(Adapted from Geist, 2016).

'It needs to be affirmed clearly that young children's burgeoning geographical knowledge, understanding and skills, alongside their developing

attitudes and values, offer much that can be focused through and built on in good Early Years practice in the classroom environment and outdoor learning area. Not least, this capability should be recognised in the early learning literature as geographical and referred to in debates and planning as geography. To do less – let alone to even appear to disregard it – is to do young children a gross disservice and grave injustice' (Catling, 2006, p.72).

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Web Resources

- Download a list of *Primary Geography* EYFS articles: <https://tinyurl.com/ft5ptwb7>
- Further guidance from the GA: <https://www.geography.org.uk>
- Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination: <https://www.cambridgecandi.org.uk/>
- Common World Research collective: <https://commonworlds.net/>
- Field Studies Council: <https://www.field-studies-council.org/>
- Froebel Trust: <https://www.froebel.org.uk/training-and-resources>
- The Mosaic Approach: <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/say-your-piece/pamphlets>

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