

## Activity Boxes – A Resource for Engaging Parents in their Children's Learning



“What parents **do** is more important than what parents **are**.”  
*Effective Provision of Pre-school Practice (EPPE, 2004)*

## Introduction

In the Partnership with Parents toolkit we look at strategies to involve parents in their children's learning. Activity Boxes provide an example of a strategy which allows children to continue their learning at home, sharing it with their parents and support the relationship between parents and practitioners.

The idea behind the activity box is that a child can take home resources relating to an interest or activity that had started within the setting and share this at home, continuing the activity keeping the child motivated with their learning. Some boxes can be premade in anticipation as children have predictable interests (spiders, firefighting, farms, and seaside) and some boxes are prepared as they are in context, an Autumn box or a Birthday box. Other boxes can be assembled quickly with contents that will allow a child to continue to explore their interest or activity at home.



### Firefighter Activity Box

**Contents:** Wooden puzzle, 5 firefighter figures, 5 Little Firemen song sheet, Fireman Sam number cards, props for role play (fire alarm, fire bell, id badges and fire helmet) – complete with blue tack to stick to the wall at home, Word cards, ICAN Talk Together guidance for parents and/or carers, Activity Box guide sheet & digital camera.

*“It is vital to recognise the importance of the role of a child’s parents and or carers in providing them with rich home learning experiences during their early years. Research has shown that the Home Learning Environment has a positive impact on a child’s early learning and development that is reflected in their attainment levels at Year 5 upwards” (EPPE, 2004).*

*“As home has such a powerful effect on children’s learning it should come as no surprise that the most effective early years settings - those that achieve the best social and intellectual outcomes for their children - work closely with parents. These settings share their educational aims clearly and encourage high levels of engagement. They work to build parent confidence in what they do already at home and they offer ideas to support and enhance this. Most significantly, they exchange information about children regularly on a weekly or monthly basis with parents. They listen to what parents have to say about their own child’s capabilities and interests, and make use of these observations for future planning, encouraging parents to be active in this planning process. They also support children’s learning at home directly with suggested activities and the loan of materials that complement what happens in the setting.”*

*(Siraj-Blatchford et al 2003; Sylva et al 2004; Desforges 2003)*

## Links with Statutory Duties / Policies and Procedures / EYFS Welfare and Safeguarding

The revised EYFS seeks to provide partnership working between practitioners and parents and/or carers. A strong focus of this is the effectiveness of partnership with parents and how they are actively engaged in their child’s learning. There is a much greater emphasis in the EYFS on the two way sharing of information by developing effective partnership working with parents. These relationships are built upon trust and mutual respect for one another.

### Overarching Principles of the EYFS

- Every child is a **Unique Child** who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident & self-assured
- Children can learn to be strong and independent through **positive relationships**
- Children learn & develop well in **enabling environments** in which their experiences respond to their individual needs and there is a strong partnership between practitioners and parents and/or carers
- Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates

### Ofsted Self Evaluation

*Developing positive and effective partnerships with parents will enable you to provide evidence of the following points for your SEF*

**How well the early years provision meets the needs of the range of children who attend**

- promote children’s learning and development
- help each child enjoy their learning and make progress towards the early learning goals
- support each child in their learning and work with parents and carers as partners in children’s learning and development

**The contribution of the early years provision to the well-being of children**

- form appropriate bonds and secure emotional attachments with their carers
- practice ensures each child forms appropriate bonds and secure emotional attachments with carers

**The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the early years provision**

- understand your responsibilities in meeting the learning and development and safeguarding and welfare requirements of the EYFS
- oversee the educational programmes to ensure that all areas of learning are included and that assessment is consistent and used well to inform planning
- work in partnership with parents and others

**The Early Years Foundation Stage : Characteristics of Effective Learning**

**Engagement – Playing and Exploring**

Children are keen explorers and enjoy investigating and experiencing things, as well as playing with what they know and be willing to ‘have a go’.

**Motivation – Active Learning**

Children get involved and concentrate on activities. They keep trying when they encounter a challenge, especially as they are motivated by an activity because it is developed from their interests. The children enjoy achieving what they set out to do.

**Thinking – Creating and thinking critically**

Children have their own ideas and are allowed to develop them, making links between ideas and having a strategy for doing things.

**The Early Years Foundation Stage : Areas of Learning and Development**

### Prime Areas

- **Personal Social and Emotional Development**

The activity boxes provide endless opportunities for the creation and development of positive relationships. From the practitioner allowing the child to take the box home to the child sharing the box with their parent and/or carer within their home environment. It's not just parents! Some grandparents like to get involved too as well as siblings. The trust involved between the setting and the child and their family builds self-esteem and confidence.

- **Physical Development**

The range of resources within an activity box can provide children with opportunities to be active and interactive. Accessories to encourage role play and movement can be included. Supporting parents and/or carers to understand the importance of physical activity when playing may give them confidence to support their child when using the box.

- **Communication and Language**

Activity boxes can allow children to experience a language rich environment from the setting to their home. Books, rhymes and songs linked to the activity within the box provide children with these opportunities in a context relevant to their interest/activity which they had chosen themselves. Children can also express themselves if the resources in the box allow them to engage in role play.

### Specific Areas

- **Literacy**

A language rich activity box which is linked to a child's interest or the continuation of an activity will allow the child to continue to explore retaining their interest in doing so helping them progress. Song sheets to help parents and/or carers join in with songs and books to share a story.

- **Mathematics**

Include resources which encourage children to look at numbers through song, rhymes or discussion. Objects to count, such as five little fire-fighters standing in a row. Collecting fir cones, big ones, little ones, more or less. The activity boxes you create can provide children with opportunities to develop and improve their mathematics skills.

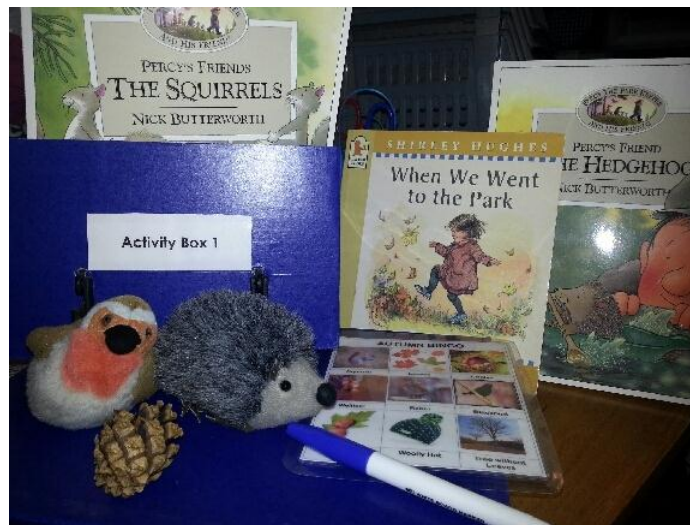
- **Expressive Arts and Design**

The resources within the activity box and which the child themselves can add to the box will enable children to explore and play with a wide range of media and materials. The children can be provided with the resources to encourage their parents

to explore with them. Send the box home with all the ingredients needed to make an activity such as playdough or gloop. Share with parents the endless possibilities of learning through open ended play.

- **Understanding the World**

Activity boxes such as the seasonal Autumn box (see picture below) allow children to look at the world within which they live by exploring it physically and sensually, observing and finding out more about their environment. Encouraging children to develop a sense of place by visiting local parks, woods, beaches, taking photos and talking about what they have found.



**Seasonal Activity Box – Autumn**

**Contents:** Percy the Park Keeper books (hedgehog & squirrels), soft toy hedgehog & squirrel, RSPB robin (complete with bird song when back is stroked), Autumn Bingo card and pen, fir cones (collected by the children when taken home), book about the park in Autumn, ICAN Talk Together guidance for parents/carers, Activity box guidance sheet & digital camera.

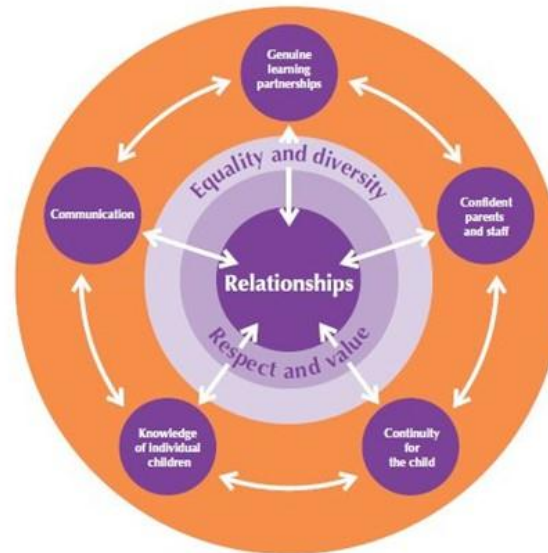
## Effective practice

- Ensure parents and/or carers fully understand there are no great expectations with an activity box. Parents who have low self-confidence or who do not fully understand what is expected will not use the box effectively.



- If sending home a box with the ingredients for a craft activity, such as a pom pom spider make sure everything a child and their parent would need is available so there is no delay, for example no glue might mean they don't have a go.
- Encourage parents and children to feed back to you and other children in the setting using different methods of communication. Some parents may feel uncomfortable with writing an observation for you. Including a camera is a sign that you trust the parents and children and also means there is no need for written words as parents and the child can give you a narrative of each photo when you look through. You can make the notes and this relieves the parent of having to do so.
- Use alongside the Home Learning Environment toolkit to share effective strategies with parents.
- Where possible try not to put a time limit on how long the box goes home for. This may be difficult when sending home resources from the setting but having duplicates in future will make this easier. This again takes pressure of parents and they will more likely have a go.

Values and principles promoting parental involvement in children's learning – the PEAL model



## Links to the child’s home learning environment

An activity box can provide the most basic resources which can still have a positive impact on the home learning environment. The Activity boxes are most effective with support and guidance for parents and /or carers so that they understand there are no great expectations when sending a child home with an activity box. Verbal feedback works as well as written observations.

For the full Home Learning Environment toolkit please visit CYPS Info website ([www.cyps.northyorks.gov.uk](http://www.cyps.northyorks.gov.uk))

## Definitions

<b>Parent</b>	The adults caring for a child within the home
<b>Reading</b>	Sharing stories, books, rhymes and songs together between the parent and child
<b>Playing</b>	It is chosen by the child and the parent actively takes part
<b>Talking</b>	Turn taking in conversations, speaking, listening and responding appropriately
<b>Happy Child</b>	The child feels safe, confident and expressive
<b>Happy Parent</b>	The parent is engaged, motivated, confident and self-aware
<b>Healthy</b>	A well balanced diet with regular exercise inside and outside of the home

## Supporting Parents with 5 a day:

**Share a Story** – Include books & rhymes/song cards in the box. If parents don’t know the song record you and/or the children singing the song in the setting, put in on cd and put it in the box. Little figures and puppets could be included to provide parents and children with props to use as they share the book. Guide parents on how to share a story, sing rhymes & nursery rhymes.

**Play Together on the Floor** - Share with parents the benefits of getting down onto the floor to play. Reassure parents that it is not expected but making a bit of time to play together at the child’s level will support their learning through play.

**Talk with your child with the telly off** – Suggest to parents that they can better focus on playing with the box with the telly off. Encourage them to talk about what’s in the box with the children and ask the children why they wanted to bring the box home.



**Give your Child healthy & nutritious food to aid their development** – Provide parents with advice & guidance on how they help their child eat more nutritious food. For resources and lots of fun ideas register with Change 4 Life. An activity box linked with healthy eating such as planting vegetables & gardening could develop the parents & children's understanding of healthy eating.

**Be positive & praise your child** – Ensure all members of your team are positively role modelling this to parents. When parents collect their child share how you have praised them during their day with you. Encourage parents to share the positives not just the negatives. Promote positive behaviour within your provision and share with parents how you do this and ask them to support you by doing it at home.

### **Promote the Home Learning Environment with parents and/or carers**

Hold a parents evening focused on the Home Learning Environment & strategies you will be using such as the activity boxes so you are not springing this on to unsuspecting parents at home time. Ask parents and/or carers for ideas, suggestions and feedback. Remember to feed this information into your SEF for Ofsted. Engaging parents in their children's learning is a major theme running through the revised EYFS framework and it is good practice to provide evidence of this for Ofsted.

## **Reflecting on Practice / Self Evaluation**

Before you go any further, you might find it useful to evaluate how good your practice is right now.

The questions below may help you to review your current practice and ensure that everyone is fully aware of your policies and procedures. We have provided suggested questions for the leader/childminder, staff and parents. You may choose to use all of these or just one or two sections, depending on your provision and how confident you feel about your policies and procedures. You can use the questions as individual questionnaires or use them informally through staff meetings, chats with parents etc.

When you answer these questions, don't just answer yes or no – think about the question and ask yourself:

- How do I know?
- What is my evidence?
- Is that always the case?
- Is that true of everyone using the provision?

The column for “**Any further development needed**” on each questionnaire is best completed by the whole team or by the childminder. This becomes part of the development plan for your provision so it’s important that it is thought about and completed by the person/people who will be responsible for carrying it out.

Consider if it would also be helpful to ask parents and children their views and feedback to your provision, and how you might do this.

**Questions for the leader / manager / childminder**

<b>Consider</b>	<b>Our current practice</b>	<b>Examples of evidence of this within our setting</b>	<b>Any further development needed Date to be completed by:-</b>
<i>How do currently engage parents in their children’s learning?</i>			
<i>How do you support parents to understand the benefits of being involved?</i>			
<i>How do you develop positive relationships with parents and build on this?</i>			
<i>How do you promote the Home Learning Environment with parents?</i>			
<i>How do I involve parents as partners?</i>			

**Questions for practitioners**

<b>Consider</b>	<b>Our current practice</b>	<b>Examples of evidence of this within our setting</b>	<b>Any further development needed Completed by:-</b>
How do I allow a key child to continue an activity they have been involved in at home?		<i>T found a spider in the toilets. I found the spider activity box. T liked the pictures of spiders in the book &amp; was looking forward to taking it home because he knows Mummy doesn't like spiders!</i>	
How do I know what a child has been doing in the home?	<i>Diaries, verbal conversations</i>	<i>Activity box with camera sent home. J brought back lots of photos of him &amp; granddad playing Fire Engines with the the props in the box. They also recorded J and granddad singing five little firemen.</i>	
How do I allow children to learn about their environment?		<i>K took the Autumn activity box home. She was at Grandmas and took it with her. They took the Autumn bingo out with them when they went to the park. K collected lots of lovely items and shared them with us. Fir cones and acorns from the park she plays in at Grandmas.</i>	

## Supporting Information and Resources

### **Useful Links**

Department for Education  
[www.education.gov.uk](http://www.education.gov.uk)

Ofsted  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

4Children  
[www.4children.org.uk](http://www.4children.org.uk)

PEAL – Parents as partners in their children’s early learning & development  
[www.peal.org.uk](http://www.peal.org.uk)

Don’t forget to use the support available to you through NYCC staff:

*Your local Children’s Centre team including:*

- Childcare Sufficiency Support Officers
- Learning and Teaching Consultants
- Inclusion Officers