

Developing chronological understanding and language in the Early Years and Foundation Stage

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Developing secure chronological understanding is an essential aspect of effective history learning. Chronological understanding develops over time and children's progress in this can be most effectively secured if schools plan for development in this area and provide opportunities for children to build upon their understanding throughout their time in school.

History as a subject forms part of the National Curriculum for Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 but developing early chronological understanding is crucial for younger children in order that they can make sense of their day-to-day lives and can talk about past and upcoming events with understanding. This will also support children's future learning when they come to engage with history as a discrete subject.

Table 1 on Page 9 sets out the expectations of this for children in the EYFS and considers how this relates to National Curriculum (2013) requirements for Key Stage 1.

There are a number of key components of chronological understanding. Ian Dawson details these on his website www.thinkinghistory.co.uk and they can be seen in the first two columns of Table 2 on Page 10. The third column considers how each component might be developed in an EYFS classroom.

It is important that each of these key aspects of chronological understanding is identified, taught explicitly and revisited regularly. It is through doing this that children gain a secure chronological understanding.

However, while the importance of developing children's chronological understanding is undeniable, it is not necessarily an easy thing to do. Understanding the concept of time can be tricky, and if you are only four years old, can present even more of a challenge!

The title of Penelope Harnett's article about young children and chronology encapsulates this potential confusion perfectly: 'I was meant to have been born on my birthday but I arrived a day late' (Harnett, 2011, p. 14)!

In order to engage with all of the different components of chronological understanding, children need to develop vocabulary related to each and be able to use this vocabulary confidently and with understanding.

Children's language development: the importance of a language-rich environment

An important part of children's language development, which precedes them using language, is being exposed to vocabulary and receptive to it. This is no different when considering

vocabulary related to chronological understanding – in order for children to use chronological language with understanding and confidence, it is important that they are given many opportunities to be exposed to a wide variety of such language. Harnett (2011) discusses how, through learning new words in different contexts and attaching meaning to them, children's range and understanding of vocabulary develops.

Simple day-to-day conversations can support this; asking questions of children about what they have just done, seen, or want to do etc. encourages them to use language and tenses associated with time. Engaging with children and prompting them with questions, introducing vocabulary and supporting them in using correct tenses is something that can be done throughout each day.

There are many and varied opportunities for chronological vocabulary and understanding to be developed in the EYFS, some of which are considered here.

Stories, songs and rhymes

The diagram on p. 11 shows how these provide rich opportunities for developing chronological understanding.

Use of timelines in the EYFS

Simple timelines can be used very effectively to develop children's understanding of different aspects

Table 1 : Chronological understanding: EYFS to Key Stage 1

<p>There are many areas of the current EYFS statutory framework which will support children’s development in this area, not just the ones identified below. However, the following have been highlighted as they can specifically relate to developing early chronological understanding:</p>	<p>The revised EYFS framework (which will be statutory from September 2021) also identifies similar aims in its ELGs. This is currently being used by schools participating in the EYFS reforms early adopter year (September 2020 to August 2021).</p>	<p>This prepares children well for Key Stage 1 where the requirements of the Key Stage 1 National Curriculum for history state that:</p>
<p>Communication and language Speaking: children express themselves effectively, showing awareness of listeners’ needs. They use past, present and future forms accurately when talking about events that have happened or are to happen in the future. They develop their own narratives and explanations by connecting ideas or events.</p> <p>Understanding the world People and communities: children talk about past and present events in their own lives and in the lives of family members. They know that other children don’t always enjoy the same things, and are sensitive to this. They know about similarities and differences between themselves and others, and among families, communities and traditions.</p>	<p>Communication and language Speaking: Children at the expected level of development will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in small-group, class and one-to-one discussions, offering their own ideas, using recently introduced vocabulary. • Offer explanations for why things might happen, making use of recently introduced vocabulary from stories, non-fiction, rhymes and poems when appropriate; Teacher should be understood to refer to any practitioner working with the child. • Express their ideas and feelings about their experiences using full sentences, including use of past, present and future tenses and making use of conjunctions, with modelling and support from their teacher. <p>Understanding the world Past and present: Children at the expected level of development will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about the lives of the people around them and their roles in society. • Know some similarities and differences between things in the past and now, drawing on their experiences and what has been read in class. • Understand the past through settings, characters and events encountered in books read in class and storytelling. 	<p>Pupils should develop an awareness of the past, using common words and phrases relating to the passing of time. They should know where the people and events they study fit within a chronological framework and identify similarities and differences between ways of life in different periods. They should use a wide vocabulary of everyday historical terms.</p>

of chronology and as a means to provide opportunities to engage children in discussions about time.

Visual timetables

A visual timetable of each day is a staple in most EYFS settings. Pictures are used to represent different activities (for example, story time, playing, phonics, lunch, etc.). These can be shared and discussed with children at the start of each day and a visual timeline of the day constructed. This supports children in visualising their day and relating aspects of it to each other. Changes in routines can be

communicated and explained and children are given a framework which helps them to develop their conceptual understanding of time.

Building a timeline of our year

A to-scale timeline of the school year (in days or weeks) could be displayed and this can be added to and developed week by week by the children and could include:

- what we enjoyed doing this week – trips, special events, achievements etc.

- birthdays – children can use this to understand where their birthday falls in relation to their friends’ birthdays
- religious celebrations – children can begin to understand where these occur and that while they may celebrate some religious festivals, their friends may celebrate different ones, or may not celebrate any at all
- holiday weeks – this can help children build an understanding of the organisation and of their school year

Table 2 : The key components of chronological understanding

Taken from: www.thinkinghistory.co.uk		In the EYFS this might take the form of:
a) Language and terminology	from words such as 'before' and 'after' to AD, BC, century, Roman, Tudor to sequence, duration, chronology etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using words such as: before, after, now, then, autumn, winter, spring, summer, tomorrow, yesterday, days of the week, months of the year, this week, next week, etc. • using mathematical language relating to number and counting
b) The big picture of events across time	also referred to in the National Curriculum as 'a chronological framework'. This means that children gradually build up a sense of how periods and events fit together in sequence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building a timeline as the school year progresses, including special events and children's birthdays, interacting with it regularly
c) Sequence	not simply knowing that the Tudors came before the Stuarts but also understanding why putting events in the correct sequence is important for explaining why events took place.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listening to stories, answering questions about stories, retelling stories in different ways, offering reasons why things happened in stories or why characters made certain choices, considering what might have happened if they'd done something different instead • explaining and exploring daily routines, using a visual timetable in class, etc. • engaging in role play
d) Duration	developing a sense of the length of time, for example that the era of Roman Britain was nearly six times longer than the Victorian period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • beginning to understand the structure of their week (five days in school and two days at home during the weekend), that there is a week's holiday coming up, etc.
e) Sense of period	understanding what's special and distinctive about a period of history, not simply what happened during that period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • describing aspects of their own lives and the lives of others, including parents and grandparents, recognising change and similarities and differences (e.g. toys they like to play with and toys their grandparents played with)

Children should be given regular opportunities to engage with their timeline and discuss aspects of it, relating events to each other. Visual representations of events on the timeline will support children to engage with it and use it more independently.

Wallpaper walk – familiar story timeline

This is a good activity for the playground, school hall or length of the classroom as it requires space. Using rolled out wallpaper, make a story map timeline; include as many or as few prompts (pictures and words) as you judge your children would need and take them for a walk and let them tell the story. Story walks

could be a regular feature of the outdoor environment and children could take each other for walks and retell familiar stories or use picture prompts to make up their own.

Using timelines to explore daily routines

In her article 'Developing early history skills and understanding' (2019), Emily Dickenson discusses how she worked with nursery children to develop early chronological understanding through exploring their daily routines and using simple timelines. Emily's article and accompanying lesson plan can be accessed here: www.history.org.uk/go/Skills&Understanding

There are many valuable and enjoyable learning activities that form part of EYFS practice which can contribute to building a secure foundation of early chronological understanding for children. From this secure foundation they are well placed to develop understanding further as they move into Key Stage 1.

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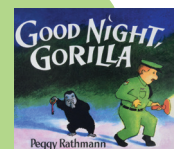
Stories

Stories are an excellent way to support the development of children's chronological language and understanding. Children can enjoy listening to and discussing stories. As stories become familiar to children they can join in with repeated words and phrases and say what will happen next. Old favourites such as *The Gruffalo*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *Handa's Surprise* and *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* provide excellent opportunities for this and have wonderful illustrations to accompany the text and support understanding.



Wordless picture books

Wordless picture books can be used to encourage children to describe what they see on each page and vocabulary can be introduced to support them in doing this. Children can explain what they think is happening and predict what they think is going to happen next, giving reasons for this. Children can form their own narratives and interpretations of picture books. *Pancakes for Breakfast* and *Goodnight Gorilla* are just two of many excellent wordless picture books which could be used.



Developing early chronological language and understanding

Using toys to tell stories

Using a toy of a well-known character from a familiar story, let the children retell the story as they remember it.

They could say a few sentences each as they hold the toy and then pass it to the next child to continue.

It's also a good opportunity to question children about what came next, what happened before this, as a result of – and so on.

This could be developed so children make up their own stories about the toy.



Songs and nursery rhymes

There are many songs and nursery rhymes children can sing which enable them to become familiar with, and use, time-related vocabulary. Effective use of questioning around these can support children's understanding (there are lots of songs on YouTube relating to the days of the week and months, etc.).

Picture cards

As a variation to wordless picture books, cards showing characters, settings and events can be used to invent and tell stories. Children can choose the order of the cards and build a narrative around them.

As with all the story-related activities, characters' motivations for their actions and what happens as a result can be explored, supporting the development of conceptual understanding alongside vocabulary development.



Further reading

Department for Education (2017) *Early years foundation stage statutory framework* [pdf]. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2

Department for Education (2020) *Early adopter schools: EYFS framework* [pdf]. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-adopter-schools-eyfs-framework

Department for Education (2013) *The National curriculum in England: history programmes of study* [pdf]. Available from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-history-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-history-programmes-of-study



HA resources

Dickenson, E. (2019) 'Developing early history skills and understanding' in *Primary History*, 83, pp. 8–9. Available from: www.history.org.uk/go/Skills&Understanding

Harnett, P. (2011) 'I was meant to have been born on my birthday but I arrived a day late' in *Primary History*, 59, pp. 14–15. Available from: www.history.org.uk/go/Children&Chronology

Kirkland, S. (2020) 'Using stories to support early history skills and understanding in the EYFS' in *Primary History*, 84, pp. 8–9. Available from: www.history.org.uk/go/StoriesEYFS



Websites

Dawson www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/ChronologicalUnderstanding.html

Hodkinson, A. (2012) 'How to teach chronology KS1 and KS2' in *Teach Primary*. Available from: www.teachprimary.com/learning_resources/view/how-toteach-chronology-in-ks1-ks2