



Developmental Expectations, 3–5 Years

A review of the EYFS developmental guidance, 36–48 & 48–60 months

Play Days Nursery & Academy | September 2026

Internal reference for planning, assessment & school transition



1. Which guidance is current

- **EYFS statutory framework** — the framework is statutory. Changes taking effect 1 September 2026 relate to welfare & safeguarding (safer sleep wording moved into the main body, banned dog breeds, reporting allegations of harm rather than serious harm, enhanced checks for volunteers & before new employees start, staff disclosure) & introduce new screen use guidance for early years settings. The educational programmes & Early Learning Goals are unchanged.
- **Development Matters** — DfE non-statutory curriculum guidance, last updated 4 September 2023. Organised into three broad bands: birth to three · three & four-year-olds · children in reception.
- **Birth to 5 Matters** — non-statutory guidance from the Early Years Coalition, second edition published 2026. Deliberately uses developmental Ranges rather than ages, which suits a setting with a wide spread of starting points.
- **What to Expect in the Early Years Foundation Stage: a guide for parents** — the current parent-facing guide. It replaced **What to Expect, When** (4Children, 2015) in September 2021. Any Play Days document still citing the older title should be updated.

Action: our curriculum content needs no change for September 2026, but our welfare, safeguarding & e-safety policies do — the screen use guidance is new & the harm reporting threshold has moved.



2. What matters most for Play Days

Above the age of three, the guidance recognises only two bands: ‘three & four-year-olds’ & ‘children in reception’.

- **Children who leave us at three** for a school nursery class are benchmarked against the early part of the 3–4 band. Our job is that they leave secure in the Prime Areas — talking, listening, self-care & emotional regulation
- **Children who stay a further year** & leave us at four or nearly five are still within the 3–4 band, at its upper end. They are not ‘Reception children’. The 4–5 band describes what Reception will teach, not what we should be teaching explicitly



3. 36–48 months · 3–4 years

What the guidance expects, area by area. This is the band our whole pre-school room sits in.

Communication & Language

- Enjoys longer stories & remembers significant detail; can tell a long story
- Uses increasingly varied vocabulary & likes explanations of new words

- Understands multi-part instructions — “get your coat & wait at the door”
- Answers & asks ‘why’ questions about events
- Builds sentences of four to six words; uses talk to organise pretend play
- Still learning word endings — “runned” for “ran” is entirely typical & is not an error to correct, but to model back

Personal, Social & Emotional Development

- Enjoys responsibility — fetching the fruit, washing up a plate
- Plays cooperatively & begins to resolve conflict by suggesting an alternative
- Understands why rules matter & begins to remember them without reminders
- Expresses feelings using varied vocabulary; developing empathy
- Self-care: buttons & zips, pouring a drink, knife & fork, brushing teeth, washing hands thoroughly

Physical Development

- Skips, hops, stands on one leg; walks upstairs using alternate feet
- Chooses the movement that suits the task — crawl, walk or run across different surfaces
- Uses one-handed tools including scissors with developing control; hand preference emerging
- Collaborates to move large objects; enjoys group & team games, sometimes of their own invention

Literacy

- The five print concepts — print has meaning; print has different purposes; we read left to right & top to bottom; the parts of a book; we read pages one at a time
- Phonological awareness — spotting rhyme, clapping syllables, hearing words that start with the same sound
- Applies emerging sound & letter knowledge to early writing
- Writes some or all of their own name; writes some letters accurately

Mathematics

- Subitises — instantly recognises groups of up to three without counting
- Counts past five, one number per item, & knows the last number is the total
- Shows finger numbers to five; matches numeral to amount up to five
- Uses comparison language — more than, fewer than
- Explores 2D & 3D shape in everyday & mathematical language; describes position & route
- Makes, continues & spots errors in ABAB patterns

Understanding the World

- Explores natural materials with all the senses; investigates collections by property
- Learns their own life story & family history; interested in the jobs people do
- Plants seeds, cares for growing things & begins to understand life cycles
- Talks about forces & about materials changing, for example in cooking
- Develops positive attitudes to difference; knows other countries exist

Expressive Arts & Design

- Uses objects symbolically in pretend play, even when they look nothing like the real thing
- Builds detailed small worlds — a city with buildings & a park
- Draws with increasing complexity & detail — a face as a circle with features
- Uses drawing to show ideas such as movement or loud noise; explores colour mixing
- Sings whole songs, matches pitch, follows the shape of a melody, invents songs of their own
- Plays instruments with increasing control to express feeling

4. 48–60 months · 4–5 years · the reception age range

This is what the guidance describes for **children in Reception**. Set out here so that we know precisely where our children are heading — & so that we do not mistake it for what we should be teaching.

Communication & Language

- Uses clear, well-formed sentences; connects ideas with and, or, but, because
- Explains how they solved a problem; discusses experiences in detail
- Retells familiar stories in their own words; uses new vocabulary deliberately

Personal, Social & Emotional Development

- Manages personal hygiene independently
- Names calming strategies & considers others' feelings across situations
- Understands healthy eating, tooth-brushing, sleep routines, screen time limits & road safety

Physical Development

- Moves with control & grace; responds quickly to changes of speed & direction
- Develops the strength & coordination for dance, swimming & gymnastics
- Develops an efficient handwriting style; good sitting posture
- Learns the practical skills of the school day — lining up & queuing

Literacy - note how far beyond our band this sits

- Says the sound for each letter & blends sounds to read short words
- Reads letter groups — th, sh, ee — & common exception words such as do & said
- Reads simple phrases & sentences; re-reads books to build fluency
- Forms lower-case & capital letters correctly; spells by identifying sounds
- Writes short sentences with a capital letter & a full stop, & re-reads to check for sense

Mathematics - likewise

- Subitises to five; counts beyond ten
- Understands one more than & one less than
- Knows how numbers to ten are composed
- Recalls number bonds for 0–5 & some to 10
- Rotates & combines shapes; creates repeating patterns

Understanding the World & Expressive Arts

- Names & describes people in the community; draws information from a simple map
- Compares past & present; understands that different beliefs & celebrations exist
- Refines artistic effects & returns to earlier work to develop it
- Sings in a group or alone, matching pitch & following melody



5. What this means for Play Days

Where our curriculum is correctly pitched

Our pre-school Literacy & Mathematics teaching sit within the 3–4 band. *Subitising to three, counting past five with meaning, comparison language, ABAB patterns, rhyme & alliteration, hearing the first sound in a word, oral blending, writing some or all of my name* — every one of these is 3–4 age range & is now named in our curriculum & our I CAN statements.

Where we have a genuine gap

- **Understanding the World** — the 3–4 band is rich here (life story & family history, jobs people do, planting & life cycles, materials changing, other countries, respect for the natural world). Our pre-school curriculum lists it as a specific area but gives it no section of its own & no I CAN statements. This is our most visible gap.
- **Expressive Arts & Design** — the same. No section, no I CAN statements. Our Atelier work is exactly this area, & reads as an aspiration document rather than as part of the curriculum. Bringing the two together would close the gap immediately.
- **Cultural capital** — the 3–4 band assumes experiences an inner-city child may not have had: planting & growing, knowing that other countries exist, the jobs people do. Naming these as deliberately planned experiences rather than incidental ones is worth doing, & it is exactly the argument our EYFS Policy Statement already makes about the child in a flat.

For transition

For a child leaving at three, we endeavour to ensure that our children are: secure in the Prime Areas, early in the 3–4 band across the Specific Areas. For a child leaving at four or nearly five: secure across the whole 3–4 band, with the Prime Areas taught to real depth, plus oral blending, subitising & the practical independence Reception relies on.



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Imelda Rylatt, Director · September 2026