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Published: 14 December 2007

The crucial role of pretend play and talk for very young children has been emphasised by a study for the Primary Review.

Researchers from Oxford and Cambridge universities have looked into research since 1967 on children's cognitive development.

New research on psychology suggests that some child development theories which underpinned past child-centred approaches to teaching are out of date.

The ideas of Piaget, the Swiss psychologist - that children go through developmental stages in learning to think - are no longer valid, with different ways of learning all observed soon after birth.

The researchers stress that the more often children experience something, the better they learn. Because of this, a multi-sensory approach to education is a good idea.

But there is no research supporting the idea that teaching children according to an individual learning style - such as visual, auditory or kinaesthetic items - has special benefits.

The study emphasises that physical interaction with the world is critical for young children. Knowledge gained through language, pretend play and teaching then builds on this. Children learn in a similar way to adults but do not have the same awareness of their own learning.

However, it can help if children are explicitly taught such skills as how to be aware if they do not understand something and how to seek guidance.

Pretend play is possibly the earliest way that children practise learning to learn. Language development is also critical, but varies markedly in the pre-school years with two-year-olds being able to speak between none and 500 words, the study says.

While the alphabet and reading have to be directly taught, they depend on language development which can be enhanced by rhyme and rhythm games.

Reading is also dependent on memory, and memory can be enhanced by talking children through and elaborating on their experiences.

Children's cognitive development and learning. by Usha Goswami and Peter Bryant.

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