

TRANSCRIPT: Understanding child development

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Child development, for us, is one of the most central things if we're thinking about staff training and development. My view is that if you were working in a mainstream school and you were asked to teach physics, you wouldn't dream of doing that if you didn't understand the scientific principles, and if you're working with pupils who have severe and profound learning difficulties, child development is, in effect, the subject knowledge that you need that underpins everything that we do. And we're not talking about the generic large milestones. We're trying to think about the smaller steps in neurological development that takes place, to ensure that the work that staff do with children is absolutely right for each individual young person.

Our knowledge of child development enables us to know the typical development that young people may move through. We understand that that changes according to children's special needs, but having that knowledge enables people to look at progress and to be able to think about what might be the next small steps.

One example would be teachers and teaching assistants having a knowledge of early reflex responses. Because the young people that we work with, many have got very complex learning disabilities, so we're looking at development which is slower than you would expect for somebody at that particular age and, therefore, neurologically, they may still have reflexes that you would have expected other children to have worked through developmentally. So we would have young people who may be much, much older but still have some typical reflexes that you see in a child of a much younger age.

For example, if a child has retained the ATNR reflex, which involves them involuntarily turning their head to the side, and a teacher doesn't recognise that, it can mean that the targets that we're setting aren't appropriate. Because it could be, for example, that a teacher interprets that movement as, 'I don't like' or 'I don't want' or 'I'm saying no to something', whereas it could be that a child actually has no control over that response and we may not actually want to be encouraging it.