

# Leading Children Topic Plans



## General Introduction

We have created a set of FREE topic-based resources for Early Years and Year 1 teachers thanks to the sponsorship of Vanquis Bank. We have tried to come up with creative ideas to connect the curriculum requirements in a creative way, that is irresistible to children. If you have any additional ideas to share, we would love to hear about them.

Each topic is intended to cover a half term, except the Seaside, which is a whole term topic.

## The topics are:

### Reception Topics

- Growing
- Me, my school and I
- All Creatures Great and Small (British Wildlife & Insects)

### Year 1 Topics

- Oh I do like to be beside the seaside
- Farms
- All Creatures Great and Small (The Poles, The Desert & Wild Animals)

## 1. Why we have done it – putting children back at the heart of learning.

Some of the commercial curriculum schemes we have seen compartmentalise learning, some put coverage of the curriculum above children's conceptual understanding or needs, others seem to keep play firmly in the background.

The success of a topic relies heavily on three things: teacher subject knowledge, a teacher's enthusiasm and activities that are well-matched to the developmental needs and potential interests of the child. This should work against the backdrop of quality indoor and outdoor provision, to which children have meaningful access every day.

## 2. Teaching and Learning Efficiencies

Children learn best from excited teachers, who are just bursting with knowledge and amazing ideas to share with them. When a child is open and interested to learn, when they can't wait to find out more, they remember it faster, ask questions, process their new knowledge more deeply, and are

ready for more. When learning also includes movement, through games and role play, visual imagery through lovely books and small world and other tactile play, children can remember and build on their embedded knowledge. Children who are colouring in worksheets, wondering when it is playtime are learning very inefficiently. They are not remembering, not engaged, therefore unlikely to question, or to care. As new neural pathways only light up in the brain as the learner themselves thinks very hard about the new subject matter, efficient learning that sticks must deeply engage them.

### **3. Children as Leaders and Stakeholders**

I feel strongly that children should be joint leaders, joint constructors of the curriculum and feel as though they are true stakeholders in their individual learning journeys. For a Reception or Year One child this involves being able to investigate the world through play, have their interests and questions discussed or even used by adults as catalysts for further learning for the whole class. Giving choices or following the children's lead are amongst the best ways of children feeling and therefore believing and engaging like stakeholders.

### **4. The Excellence of Play**

We all should know that children learn best when they are playing, but some teachers have fallen into thinking there is no time for play, that it is 'results versus play', formal learning over play or that play is a tag-on once the, 'real learning' has taken place. No! This could not be further from the truth.

I believe that play has had a bad name of late because some adults perceive that learning is slower or shallow. This may be due to lack of preparation on their part, pressure from above or a complete lack of trust in play to do its job. If you have taught children the names of everything in your classroom and general ways to describe them, if they have been taught processes, from how to wring a cloth out, to mopping, to powder painting, to clay skills, fastening skills in DT/Box modelling and computer skills, including taking and uploading/printing photos, children are highly capable at playing knowledgeably and recording their learning. Learning through play needs quality interaction on the part of the adult sometimes, but if you have no time to be in provision, inside and out, then your timetable is wrong. Child development hasn't changed at all. Young children flourish when taught through play and the balance between child-initiated and adult supported learning is in balance.

### **5. Continuous and Enhanced Provision**

Throughout our planning we will offer ideas to enhance your provision and set out some ideas for you to try in the different areas.

The success of these will directly correlate to how well the children have been trained to use them and the quality of continuous provision running alongside. To prepare a child well to embark on an enhanced activity, they must understand the learning intention, any new vocabulary, and any skills they may gain.

## 6. The Outdoor Learning Environment

I believe that the outdoor learning environment is as important as the indoor and there is nothing you cannot teach, consolidate, or practice outside.

Moreover, many children need to move to think. They are kinaesthetic learners who literally need to process thinking as they move and will thrive in the outdoor setting.

Outdoors is bigger, louder, exciting and offers freedom to learn on a bigger scale as well as on the move. Games, construction and other adventures can be the centre of learning and children can engage in much larger groups. Is your provision for outdoors as strong as it needs to be?

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Generally, we have omitted Maths from our planning as schools tend to follow set schemes. We have, however, shown how to use base cards which can be adapted to any topic. We have omitted PE and RE for the same reasons.

**Continuity and enrichment** – how much more sophisticated is your provision compared to what children have experienced in Nursery or Reception? What skills are they proficient in and where are the gaps, or next steps? Some areas of provision, such as block play, grow with the child. But do our expectations of what the child is now capable of need to change? Do we need to expect more and train the children to do the same of themselves and each other.

**Connected Learning** – If you have taught something about history, from a book, artefact or photo that you have had the children write about, do you need to do another piece of writing that day as well? Do you need to teach SPAG, e.g. capital letters and full stops using a totally unrelated sentence, or could you teach it collaboratively as a class then go through yesterday's writing with children and develop a second draft, which has capital letters, full stops and 2-5 corrected spellings, depending on the child? This means they have covered English, History and Spag around the same piece of polished work. SPAG is almost always best taught from the perspective of a child's own writing.

Also, if Geography, History and Science have been covered through continual and enhanced provision, do you need to do a separate lesson on each, or do you just need to do a preparatory session, where you introduce both the new learning/idea and talk in detail about the enhanced activity you have offered and your expectations for children's play and learning?

**Culture** – What do children in your class associate with playing in provision? A chance to learn in a different way, a chance to develop independence while still doing their very best work, or a bit of a doss, now the 'real' work (that which was done with an adult at a table for a book, is complete)?

There are lots of ways to counter this culture, but it isn't easy and one of the things you need to ensure is that as a practitioner, you are in provision, inside and out as much as possible. You also need to think about your displays: how much of the work is that which a child did completely independently in provision, based on their own ideas and interests? How is this displayed? On a 'wow' wall unmounted or on a display where the work is mounted, annotated and properly celebrated?

**Conundrums** – Is the amount of work you have to produce in books stopping you from teaching? Is it stopping you from working in provision? Do children as young as 4/5 develop lesson by lesson to warrant the recording of work every week? How would your planning change if you were *expected* to teach in provision inside and out? What skills do your children need in order to be able to operate more independently in provision and with higher expectations for the quality of their work? Do you accept anything but the children’s best work from provision? Do you check?

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## The Power of the written word

Oracy, Reading and Writing are tackled separately in all of the topics, but it is in understanding the power of the written words that children really begin to fly...

Lots of people will have heard my story about Zain and the big red bike and the way it completely changed my outlook on writing with children. If you know the story, then skip the following, but make sure your planning includes that every child in your charge experiences the power of the written word at least once per term.

Zain came into the classroom angrily, saying he was ‘biscustard’ because someone had taken the big red bike away and how the ... was he going to do taxis and weddings anymore if it had gone? Having made him think about his language and blaming the HT, Rosemary, I suggested he write her a letter of concern and complaint. Usually, Zain wouldn’t go near the writing table, but having been offered a red-for-danger and -anger paper and envelope, he set to his task beautifully, mark-making his letter and writing ‘Rosemary’ on the envelope.

When he took it to her office, I lingered, listening to their conversation. Rosemary did everything I hoped and then, in addition, something that changed the way I taught forever. She thanked him gravely for his letter, told him to help her find catalogues from the admin office then took him back to our classroom. With his letter in hand, she spoke to everyone: “Because of Zain’s letter, I am going to ask you to choose a new red bike with a platform on the back. Bring me the picture of the bike you want and I will order it, in front of Zain, today.”

After this, after he had experienced the power of the written word, I could not stop Zain from writing. He wrote posters, notes, letters to people – he literally could not resist the power and the voice it gave him and I learned to start to juice everything I could to help all of the other children experience it as well.



Sometimes you can plan for children to experience the power of the written word, but oftentimes, you just need to, 'juice' the situations that naturally come up in the classroom. There are so many if you look for them.

In our individual topic notes, I will try to offer some examples, but you mainly need to look for situations that occur: a column of ants coming through your classroom – write and tell them to go elsewhere, a posse of children coming in from outside telling you to, 'get the grass man' because the grass is too long and its tickling their legs, snack being delivered too late, campaigning to get a class pet, getting the class name changed, petitioning to go on a visit that you have told your class the head won't sanction (you know she has already booked the coach) but *juice it!*



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## How to use these materials

Whether you are dipping in and out for the odd idea here and there or doing the whole topic, our materials are there to support your **thinking, planning and knowledge**.

It is imperative, even when we teach very young children, that we have a plethora of **knowledge and resource** to share with them about the world, through the lens of the topic. Information, knowledge, ideas, concepts, images, films, maps, artefacts, songs, nursery rhymes, pieces of music, works of art and a hundred other things can bring a topic to life. This means we are bringing learning to life, making it memorable, making sure the learning 'sticks' and giving young brains markers, memories and strong images in which to process and retrieve information. This is why learning through topics is so effective. Immersing the brain, **making connections and links in learning**, keeping the curriculum as connected and as holistic as possible, supports learners in so many ways.

Have you ever heard a piece of music, or song that takes you right back to a time in your life you had otherwise forgotten? Music is a strong **brain marker**. Children need lots of different markers to help them remember information. Some brains work best with images, others words, some of us attach feelings very strongly to things, others interests and knowledge. Making sure all brain markers are covered is not easy so the first thing we have done, it to try to take the sting out of research.

Each of our topics comes with a list of hyperlinks for you to click so that images, works of art, key information and so on are now at your fingertips and rather than searching for everything, you can simply use the links we have found to support you or let them trigger more specific searches according to your need.

We have made our topics very full and wide ranging. You will not have time to cover everything unless you are taking a whole term for it, so **pick and choose** either what you think your children will be most interested in or what you still need to do to cover the Early Years Framework or The National Curriculum.

**Coverage of the curriculum** is included in each topic. Teaching it doesn't automatically mean learning has taken place or that by teaching it once it is properly embedded, but it is a good thing to visit things more than once and in different contexts. We have colour co-ordinated how different sub sections of the topic cover different elements of the Early Years Framework or the National Curriculum to support your planning.

We are making an assumption in our planning that you will **connect the curriculum** as much as possible to realise time and learning efficiencies. For example if a child is making a treasure map for pirates, on which he labels the ocean and continent, other geographical features and a written instruction once 'x' has been located, we assume that his geographical learning as well as writing task have been completed.

The initial **spider diagram** outlines my thinking in terms of what could be covered by the topic. I have then selected a few areas of potential study to plan in detail. Some activities are in the **classroom plan** – that is, enhanced provision that can either be added to continuous provision, or activities to be put out on tables.

**Talking/Reading/Writing** opportunities have been added to a separate list. You can cut and paste any of the ideas you like into your own planning. In addition to this, we have created **new vocab lists** for each part of the topic, which of course you can add to as you work with the children. Make sure you have a sharp definition for each of these words before you begin teaching the topic so you don't get caught out not knowing to put the definition into words, or giving the wrong answer!

Please give us any **feedback** when you have used any of our ideas or do please share any ideas you have used successfully so we can add them to our materials. We can then create an even more effective resource for everyone to share.

Please send all feedback to [office@leadingchildren.com](mailto:office@leadingchildren.com). Photographs of your work would be extremely helpful, but please do not send any photographs of children unless you have written permission.

Many thanks!