Book review

The growing child: Laying the foundations of active learning and physical health by Clair Stevens

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The Growing Child is the second of the four-book series Foundations of Child Development, which covers cognitive, physical, social and emotional domains. It is written by Clair Stevens, who is a senior lecturer in early years at Canterbury Christ Church University in England.

This book raises fundamental issues about children’s development as a whole, with a focus on physical health. It thoughtfully discusses key principles of children’s physical development alongside descriptions of everyday activity. While the book looks in detail at all aspects of physical development, including exercise, diet and sleep, how these link to the development of the whole child is something new. Key learning dispositions, such as perseverance, determination, confidence and responsibility, are woven into the discussion, with reference to the author’s own experience of running a Forest School nursery. Some educational philosophy is also drawn into the discussion, including mention of Reggio Emilia and the Montessori approach.

This text emphasises the importance of understanding the theory that underpins children’s physical development. Stevens clearly shows early childhood educators how they can use this knowledge to provide learning opportunities to nourish children’s health, learning, development and well-being. A section for current practitioners and student teachers provides a basic grounding in the different ways that they need to work with individual children that are developmentally appropriate. By linking theory to everyday practice, the author carefully explains why practitioners teach in certain ways and shows how they can provide further learning experiences that will help children to become more competent and enthusiastic learners.

There are nine chapters in the book. The first chapter sets the scene by introducing the importance of play, science’s contribution, movement and motor skills, health and equality, the UK national guidelines and the importance of child development.

The next three chapters examine aspects of effective learning, namely: play and exploration; active learning; and creating and thinking critically – which, incidentally, are identified in the UK Early Years Foundation Stage Framework. Although this book is based on the UK framework, it is still suitable for the New Zealand context, as play, exploration, active learning, creating and thinking critically are the guiding principles of Te Whāriki - the New Zealand early childhood curriculum.

The final two chapters provide a vision of early childhood education that prepares children for school, with reference to the Forest Schools and learning.
The author uses Forest School nursery as an example to emphasise the importance of nature through ECE practitioners’ reflections. In the final chapter, Stevens inspires the reader to consider other perspectives in children’s physical development besides play, such as the vital importance of sleep and a healthy diet.

This book is very easy to read, using plain and simple language. The layout of the book is not difficult to follow, because all chapters start with an overview of theoretical perspectives on the topic, followed by theory into practice, with a ‘challenges and dilemmas’ section for ECE practitioners to reflect on their own practice after reading. One comment that caught the eye was, “remember there is no such thing as unsuitable weather, only unsuitable clothing”.

I believe that Stevens has addressed the topic very well. Even though this book focuses on children’s physical development, a lot of the other areas have also been covered, so that it addresses the development of the whole child. This book is practical for ECE, providing many real life examples, case studies, learning stories, patterns of play and observation methods applicable to early childhood settings.

I would recommend this book to student and beginner teachers, as it provides an insight into child development on key aspects of children’s physical development in their daily life. It might also be valuable for current ECE practitioners, as it will help them rethink their practice in centres.

What I like the most about the book is that it is about the process of learning and not the content of learning. Within the series, this book particularly focuses on young children and how play can affect the process of physical development. It is about how children learn, not what they have learnt.

“I urge you to think carefully about your work with children. You can change lives and shape futures. History has prepared us and given us the ammunition for the fight and now we must act and, most importantly, make sure that we ‘do it right’” (Stevens, 2013).

References