

Too much too young?

As the 'nappy curriculum' becomes law, *M&B* investigates whether we're pushing our toddlers to the limit



There's nothing three-year-old Phoebe loves more than dressing up and singing. 'She's a right little show-off, just like children should be!' smiles her mum Marita Crofts, 32, who's also mum to Phoebe's sisters Daniella, seven, and Imogen, 16 weeks.

But with Phoebe due to start nursery in September, Marita is growing increasingly anxious. 'Phoebe loves all kinds of imaginary play, such as hosting pretend tea parties for her teddies and playing schools... I'm really worried that because of the hundreds of goals she'll now have to achieve in the "nappy

curriculum", she'll miss out on all those things - I just want her to be allowed to be a child.' Marita goes on to say, 'Putting young children under such high pressure to achieve is wrong. This framework may work for some, but not for others. Each child is unique.'

WHAT IS THE EYFS ALL ABOUT?

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework - dubbed the 'nappy curriculum' by some critics - will become law for all English nurseries and childminders in September. It

contains a huge range of targets for children aged from birth to five years and has sparked a bitter row about exactly what we should be teaching our toddlers.

Officially, the Government's aim is to guarantee high-quality care and education from birth to five years so all children gain essential skills and improve their life chances.

Sounds good. But the framework includes over 500 milestones most children are targeted to reach by the end of their reception year. The question some mums are asking is whether a compulsory framework



their child will get the best possible start in their learning and development.'

UNDER PRESSURE

Undoubtedly, the drive to give tots an academic head start is escalating. For example, on kids' cable TV channel Nick Jr in the US there's even a show designed to teach preschoolers Mandarin, so as adults they can reap the rewards of the soaring Chinese economy!

On this side of the pond, opposition to EYFS has been loud. The Open EYE

'What's needed is interaction with other adults and children... Learning letters doesn't come into it'

campaign claims the framework is harmful to children's development and the campaign is backed by leading experts including childcare guru Dr Penelope Leach. She says, 'Research suggests that what's needed for intellectual development is not formal instruction but interaction with other adults and children – games you play together; intriguing conversations about how things work... Learning letters doesn't come into it.'

She believes the learning goals may set many children up for failure.

Then there's the paperwork. 'How is a childminder, with three under-fives to care for, going to get through all that and still manage to do things like take those children on a picnic? Either the paperwork will be nonsense, or the children will miss out on the picnic – and the picnic's more important.'

ALL THOSE IN FAVOUR...

Other experts, though, say anti-EYFS campaigners have simply got the wrong end of the stick. Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford of the Institute of Education says, 'Many seem ignorant of what the framework actually says. It doesn't expect three year olds to learn to read, and there's no assessment until the reception year.'

'There are goals, but these are only the same as those a child would have at home. For example, although the framework covers language, literacy and communication, it doesn't mean very young children will be taught reading and writing. It means that when you put a vest on your child and her head pops through, you

smile. *That's communication.*' But isn't such interaction what happens anyway, whatever the childcare setting? Not necessarily, says Iram. 'The framework will ensure that adults interact, leading to improved literacy. Parents have a right to a minimum standard of care and education.'

Early-years teacher Ruth Brett, mum to Fergus, three, Rory, one, and with a third on the way, agrees. 'I believe the framework is extremely flexible. It doesn't say, "your child must be able to do these 500 things by the time they start school", it gives guidance, delivering true learning through play and a quality start to education.'

'My boys' nursery follows the framework and they're not pressured into doing anything. They're happy, well-adjusted and their achievements are celebrated every day.' ■

To check out the framework for the EYFS, visit standards.dcsf.gov.uk/eyfs. To see what the objectors say, log on to openeyecampaign.wordpress.com.

THE EYFS GOALS FOR YOUR TOT

BETWEEN EIGHT AND 20 MONTHS SHE SHOULD...

- Enjoy babbling and increasingly experiment with using sounds and words to represent objects around her.
- Understand simple meanings conveyed in speech.
- Respond to words and interactive rhymes, such as *Clap Hands*.
- Develop an awareness of number names through her enjoyment of action rhymes and songs that relate to her experience of numbers.
- Enjoy finding her nose, eyes or tummy as part of naming games.

BETWEEN 16 AND 26 MONTHS SHE SHOULD...

- Use single-word and two-word utterances to convey simple and more complex messages.
- Make random marks with her fingers and some tools.
- Distinguish between quantities, recognising that a group of objects is more than one.
- Categorise objects according to their properties.
- Be interested in pushing and pulling things, and beginning to build structures.

with so many targets will truly give children a high-quality start. Or will ambitious goals, such as 'beginning to form simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation', or 'completing a simple program on a computer' simply put too much pressure on young children?

One objection is that the framework will be statutory – by law, *all* nurseries and childminders must follow it. Yet the Government insists it has to be compulsory to be effective. As children's minister Beverley Hughes says, 'We want to make sure whatever setting parents choose, they can be confident