Hello, I’m Anne Stonehouse. This video is about very young children as active learners from birth. They seek opportunities to learn from everyone and everything around them.

In addition to learning about themselves and other people, babies and toddlers are learning about the physical or material world around them. It has been said that under three-year-olds are dedicated scientists who explore and experiment whenever they have the opportunity. By the age of three you can see evidence that they know a lot about how the world works.

These three focus areas for learning – self, others, and the physical world – are inextricably inter-connected – that is, when children are learning in one area they are almost always learning in one or both of the other areas.

From birth, children use all the abilities they have to explore the world around them. They are fascinated by most things and keen to figure out how things work. As they get older, their abilities expand, giving them an increasing variety of ways to explore the world around them.

Picture a newborn baby and a three-year-old. That should be enough to convince you that the learning that takes place in the first three years is unrivalled by the amount and variety of learning at any other time in life. If you look closely and attentively at very young children and think about what’s really happening, you see the beginnings of skills and understandings that will grow over a lifetime and that are often more readily recognised by others as learning when children are older.

Very early learning not only lays the foundations for later learning and success in school and life, but it is also important for the quality of children’s lives in the present. Early learning is particularly powerful simply because it happens first – what you learn first you learn best.

Almost everyone recognises obvious milestones in the first three years, such as naming objects or catching or throwing a ball, but much of the evidence of babies’ and toddlers’ learning is subtle and easily missed unless you know what you are looking for.

Very young babies explore, using their senses and all the skills they have. Having an impact, or making something happen, interests them and nurtures a sense of agency, of being able to have an impact.

Babies explore the properties of objects and experiment with what these objects can do.

At an early age babies demonstrate that they recognise objects and that they have learned something about their uses. You can see this in early pretend play, which, when children are older, becomes complex dramatic play.

At times their explorations can appear to be somewhat random or aimless. Typical actions such as banging a saucepan or sticking icy-pole sticks into clay may seem pointless, but they are learning through doing these things. It may not always be clear what they are learning, but their obvious deep concentration and often delight in what they are doing is strong evidence that the activity contributes to learning. Children’s deep engagement seems to attract other children.

It is clear that babies and toddlers work hard to learn.

As they get older the range of ways that they have to explore and investigate increase tremendously. Their encounters with objects and the physical world become more intentional. Their purposes or intentions become more transparent to others. There is evidence of having a plan or an aim in mind, doing things in steps or a logical order to achieve an end.

Learning to use implements such as tongs, or even cutlery, requires coordination and several steps in order to be successful.

Using equipment requires strength, coordination and practice.

They persist as they work to solve problems and overcome obstacles. They take pleasure in practising and consolidating skills acquired.

Children also learn by observing others – both adults and other children.

The ability of children under three years of age to understand what is said to them exceeds their ability to communicate using language. This means that they learn effectively from being given instructions long before they can talk fluently, particularly when verbal instructions are accompanied by demonstration.

A particularly important area of learning is learning about a variety of kinds of texts. From infancy children can learn to enjoy books and how to use them. From conversations about the contents of books they learn many things about themselves, others and the physical world.

Noticing pictures and graphics and understanding their meaning is in itself a type of literacy.

Through direct experience children learn about the natural world and how to look after it.

They learn that building up and putting together is harder than taking apart.

As children approach their third birthday and their ability to use language has advanced substantially, they offer powerful and persuasive demonstrations every day of just how much they have learned about the world!

When you’ve been in it such a short time, the world is truly filled with wonderful and amazing things to learn about and to learn from! ​