Summary of Theoretical Frameworks of Development

There are several pathways of learning, drawn from a theoretical understanding of development (see table below), which can inform the practitioner's understanding when working with learners at very early stages of development. Please note that this is not intended to be a fully-detailed list but one that is illustrative of some of the main stages of theoretical development.

Theories	Stages	Key messages
Learned behaviour	Habituation Early associative learning leading to classical conditioning Operant conditioning[1]	Learners show a change in a response to a stimulus Learners anticipate and make associations between events Learners start to recognise that their action has a consequence
Stages of learning (Hierarchy)	Acquisition Fluency Maintenance Generalisation Application or adaptation[2]	Learners acquire new responses Learners reach a level of mastery Learners consolidate and maintain a high level of competency Learners achieve mastery in different settings or contexts Learners recognise similarities and apply in new situations
Communication	Pre-intentional communication Voluntary communication Unconventional communication Conventional communication[3]	Learners show involuntary/reflexive responses Learners imitate and react to situations Learners communicate intentionally but in unconventional ways Learners use gesture or vocalisation to communicate intentionally
Cognitive development	Sensorimotor Pre-operational Concrete operational Formal operational[4]	Learning is based on motor activity and physical interaction. Object permanence develops at this stage (the knowledge that objects don't disappear when out of sight). Learners begin to use symbols and words to represent objects as their memory and imagination develops Learners begin to develop logical thinking and can work things out in their own heads Learners can think abstractly and test hypotheses

When considering the progression of learners, practitioners should take into account the stages of development outlined in the table. For example, when noting progress, it may be necessary to consider whether a child has simply acquired a new skill or knowledge, whether they are fluent in using this skill or knowledge and whether they can generalise it or apply it in different and new situations.

Finally, a recognition of the work of Vygotsky[5] and an understanding of the zone of proximal development, i.e. the difference between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can achieve with adult help, is useful. The interaction between an adult and learner (or between learners) is a key factor that will facilitate progression. A skilled communication partner who is sensitive to the learner and can scaffold or structure their learning, can impact on their ability to progress.

[1] Pavlov, I.P. (1928). Lectures on conditioned reflexes. (Translated by W. H. Grant) London: Allen and Unwin
[2] Haring, N.G., Lovitt, T.C., Eaton, M.D., & Hansen, C.L. (1978). The fourth R Research in the Classroom. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co.
[3] Rowland, C. (2013). Communication Matrix for parents and professionals. Oregon Health and Science University.
[4] Piaget, J. (1936). Origins of intelligence in the child. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
[5] Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.