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your staff will love

“Play should
not be an
added extra”

p.36

Montessori
on a
budget

p.19

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Hello



Think of young children and the images conjured in your mind's eye are likely to feature diminutive balls of boundless energy, forever on the go once they've mastered the ability to walk, then run.

Increasingly, though, more sedentary habits are taking hold – and that's bad news when it comes to health and physical development. It's

a topic several of our contributors address in this issue: Dr Leanne Jaye sets out the vital importance of fundamental movement skills to lifelong health in her article (page 40), while also highlighting worrying statistics about how little time some children are active each day. And in her piece on healthy food, Sal McKeown shares the view of one provider that lack of exercise is the biggest cause of the obesity crisis (page 20).

As always, the reasons behind this problem are varied – from ever-present screens to a lack of opportunity to play outside – but there's no doubt that early years settings can make a meaningful contribution to society's response. Over the following pages you'll find tips on supporting movements large and small, both indoors and out, for every early years age group. Whether it's making the most of tummy time in the baby room, strengthening fine motor skills outdoors, or embracing the Daily Mile, there's plenty here to help you develop healthy bodies.

Helen Mulley – Commissioning Editor



Regulars Voices

6 Nursery Now

Your update from the early years.

52 Book Corner

Inspiring titles to share with your 0–5s.

56 Have you seen

TEY's round-up of the latest early years tools, toys and activities.

9 "Families need fair access to early education"

Ministers must tackle funding inequalities, says Neil Leitch.

11 "We're risking a race to the bottom"

Local authorities are pitching parents against providers, says Tim McLachlan.

13 Acknowledge growth

Don't forget: children's preferences change, says Nikky Smedley.

66 The Secret Practitioner

"I love children, but do I like them all? No way!"



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Features

14 “Your wellbeing matters for PSED”

Good mental health is essential to support emotional regulation, explains Gemma Kirby.

16 Has Ofsted listened?

Is the inspectors’ new approach enough to build trust in the system? asks Abigail Fleary.

19 Five ways to follow the Montessori method

Doing so doesn’t require expensive resources, says Dr Helen Edwards.

20 Children need healthier food

All settings must ensure they serve nutritious meals, says Sal McKeown.

23 Inspiring environmental empathy

Sunil Matta outlines ways to help children connect with our planet.

24 Early learning in a digital world

It’s time to adapt to today’s tech-filled childhood, says Ann-Marie Piper.

28 Turn your grey spots green

Ali Aspin introduces the National Education Nature Park initiative.

30 Make time for mindfulness

Jude Harries suggests simple ways to help children slow down, relax and reflect.

32 Inside early years in Türkiye

Nilgün Erzincan shares a reflective comparison of Turkish and UK practice.

34 Meet our winners!

Discover the tools, resources and books that came top in the *Teach Early Years Awards*.

46 15 minutes of physical fun!

The Daily Mile is the perfect way to get your children moving, explains Karen Hart.

48 Help kids reconnect with reading

You hold the key to growing a generation of readers, says Tracy Jackson OBE.

50 “Fear is a strange thing”

Chris Naylor-Ballesteros explains how he’s helping young children explore the things that scare them.



TEACHING IN RECEPTION?

This issue, read about...

- Child-led approaches to science – p26
- Protecting play from creeping formalisation – p36
- Lessons for early years leaders – p38

FROM THE PUBLISHERS OF



Management

- How to keep staff happy – p61
- Building a culture of safeguarding – p62
- Trends, policy & practice for 2026 – p64
- CPD Bookshelf – p65

EYFS Focus

40 FMS in focus

Tips on supporting fundamental movement skills from Dr Leanne Jaye Adeyemi.

43 Fine motor skills

Sensory-rich learning opportunities abound in the fresh air, says Phil Armstrong.

44 Tummy time

Here’s why it’s crucial for physical development, explains Helen Buteux.

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Nursery Now

News and views from the early years



In brief...

In October, two 17-year-old boys were arrested on suspicion of computer misuse and blackmail following a cyber-attack on a chain of nurseries in London. They are alleged to have stolen the photographs, names and addresses of about 8,000 children from provider Kido.



National campaigning group Early Years Voice has criticised last year's budget for delivering nothing for PVI nurseries and childminders, and has launched a petition to persuade government to make nurseries exempt from business rates, bringing them in line with schools. You can sign it at tinyurl.com/TEYeyvp



Purnima Tanuku CBE is to leave NDNA at the end of March. Having joined the charity in 2004 as deputy chief executive, she spent 20 years as chief executive before taking on the executive chair role in 2025. She will continue to work within early years and education as a non-executive director elsewhere.

MTD challenges

A survey of over 4,800 UK childminders suggests that changes arising from HMRC's Making Tax Digital (MTD) for Income Tax for self-employed individuals could result in over half of the profession leaving the workforce – in turn, this could leave thousands of families without access to early years education and childcare provision. The issue is the removal of a popular wear and tear allowance, which permits childminders to deduct 10% of their annual income to compensate for unavoidable wear and damage to their property and furnishings. Under MTD, they will only be eligible for tax relief.



“This change increases administrative burden and will leave many childminders worse off financially, making it harder to continue providing affordable childcare.”

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50%

REDUCTION IN OUTDOOR PLAY IN THE LAST GENERATION; 75% OF PARENTS AGREE THAT SOCIETY IS LESS ACCEPTING OF CHILDREN PLAYING OUTSIDE THAN WHEN THEY WERE GROWING UP. VISIT [TINYURL.COM/TEYRTNPC](https://tinyurl.com/TEYRTNPC)

TWEET TALK

@EmmaDec77

For anyone interested in the value of nursery teachers, take a look at this post on LinkedIn... tinyurl.com/3v5vazdj #earlyyears #earlychildhood #EYFS

@TeachEarlyYrs

Why baby observation matters, practical ways to carry it out without it feeling burdensome, and how to use observations to assess learning, plan effectively and support children's next steps... tinyurl.com/TEYbob

@crecuk.bsky.social

What are your thoughts on introducing mandatory CCTV in Early Years settings? buff.ly/z3QnST5



“To ensure every child gets the best start in life, the government must take decisive action to increase support for the early years workforce.”

LILLIAN FLEMONS, RESEARCH MANAGER, NFER

“It’s not viable”

Research conducted by the DfE has established that just 27% of school-based nurseries can provide care for under-threes; the figure is 95% for PVI settings. Visit tinyurl.com/TEYsbp

Recruitment remains a challenge despite strong staff wellbeing

A report by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), published last September and recently updated, highlighted trends in recruitment, retention, pay, working conditions and wellbeing in the early years workforce. The verdict was that despite growth in staff numbers, substantial challenges remained in that area, and that the issues could prove to be a barrier to delivering the government’s expanded early years entitlement.

This view was supported by the DfE’s childcare and early years provider survey, which arrived in December last year. Commenting on the latter, NFER research manager, Lillian Flemons, said: “After three years of accelerating growth in the number of early years professionals, this progress has now stalled – just at the time the government expects more staff to be needed to deliver the final stage of the free childcare entitlement. Expanding the entitlement will mean very little on the ground if early years providers cannot attract and retain the necessary staff to make more places available.”

NFER’s own research points the finger at low pay as a consistent cause of staffing challenges: in 2022/23, early years staff earned 36% less on average than those in comparable roles. Providers, of course, set pay levels, but government funding plays a crucial role in what they can offer their practitioners. Related to this, there continue to be limited opportunities for pay progression, meaning that staff at different levels often receive relatively similar pay. Consequently, NFER is urging government to increase funding rates so that providers can offer their employees competitive wages.

Interestingly, despite these ongoing challenges, the research also suggests that levels of wellbeing in the early years sector are generally high. Many respondents reported feeling that their roles are worthwhile and that they are significantly happier on average than similar workers.



MEASLES OUTBREAK

An outbreak of measles in Enfield has highlighted the importance of vaccination. At the time of writing, 50 cases have been recorded, mostly involving children aged under 10 in schools and nurseries, though it is believed the true number of those affected is much higher. Dr Vanessa Saliba, a consultant epidemiologist at UKHSA, confirmed that the outbreak had led to some children being hospitalised. Commenting, she said, “Measles is a nasty illness for any child, but for some it can lead to serious long-term complications and tragically death. It is so easily preventable with two doses of the MMRV vaccine, and it’s never too late to catch up.”

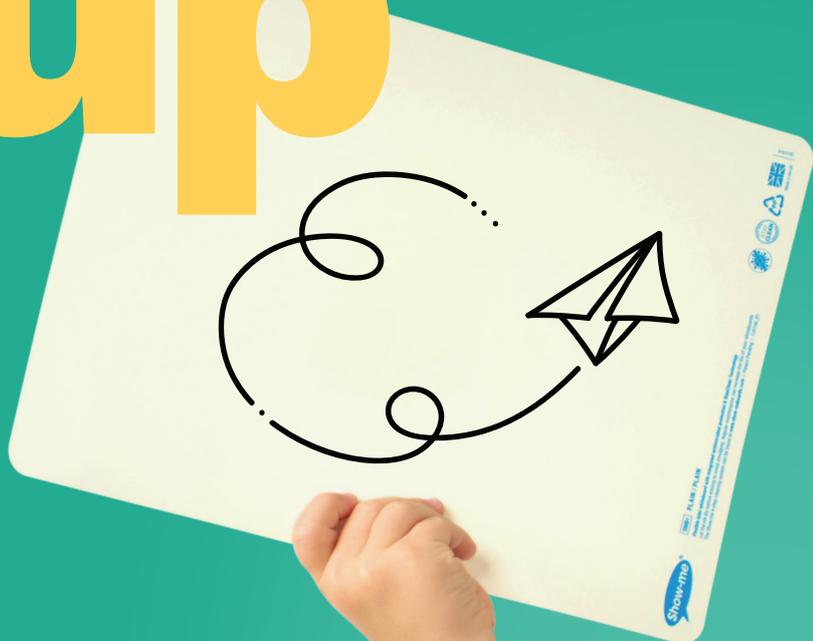
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NEIL LEITCH IS CEO OF THE EARLY YEARS ALLIANCE

“Families need fair access to early education”

Ministers must tackle fundamental inequalities in funding, says Neil Leitch...

There are around 4.5 million children across the country currently living in poverty. That’s one in three children facing hunger and hardship. In fact, according to the latest government figures, 18% of the UK’s children live in households experiencing food poverty. It’s clear, therefore, that eradicating child poverty has never been more urgent or important.

On a visit to a nursery, I witnessed first-hand a young child taking food from other children’s rucksacks and putting it in his pockets – not their sweets or chocolate, but sandwiches. When staff at the setting spoke to this little boy, it turned out he had not yet eaten that day. On another occasion, I saw a parent in tears because they had spent their entire food allowance for that day on a travel card to try and get a job, and they were not sure how they were going to feed their family that evening. And these are just some of the many stories I am privy to. I’ve no doubt that those of you working on the front line have many – too many – of your own about families who are struggling.

We are one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and yet we have countless examples of families struggling to meet their children’s basic needs. Raising families just above the threshold of poverty is not enough; we must take serious action to allow families to thrive. The economic argument for investment is beyond dispute, the return on human capital investment is beyond

dispute, and the moral obligation is beyond dispute.

Of course, I recognise that the government has taken steps to tackle this issue. At the end of last year, the Cabinet published a new Childhood Poverty Strategy, shortly after plans to scrap the two-child benefit cap were announced. Both were incredibly welcome – as were plans to make it easier for new parents on Universal Credit to return to work by extending eligibility for upfront childcare costs for those returning from parental leave. But while we at the Alliance support these measures, and welcome recognition from the government of the huge impact lifting children out of poverty can have in ensuring they get the best start in life, we’re clear that there is a lot more work to do.

We know that if you want to improve a child’s long-term life chances, there’s no better place to start than in the early years. And yet, as positive as the thinking behind the Childhood Poverty Strategy is, there

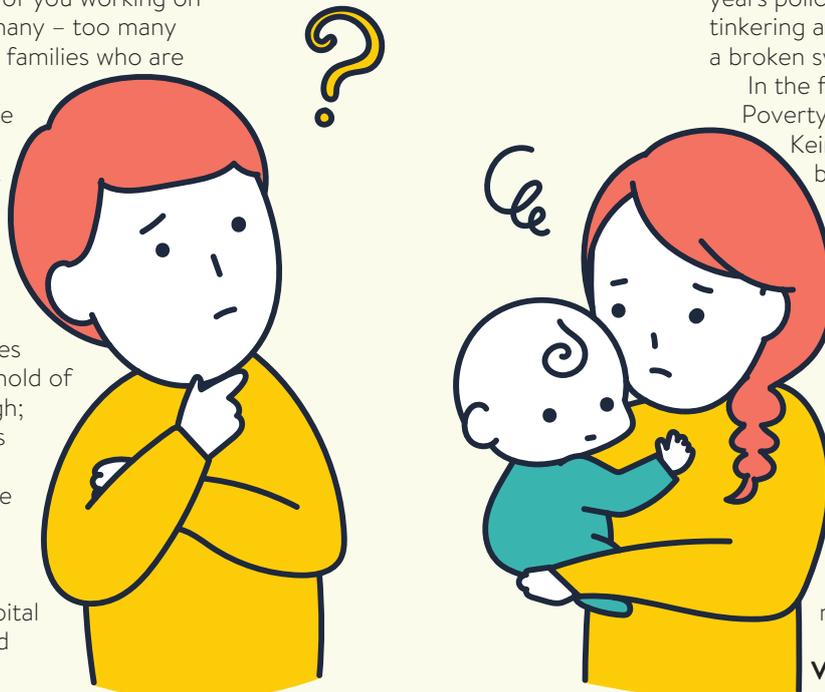
is very little in the document on how to tackle the fundamental inequalities embedded in the foundations of early years policy. We still have a system where what a child’s parent or carer earns determines how much care and early education they can access. One where that parent or carer losing their job could result in that access being halved. Where single parents with disabilities or caring responsibilities are excluded from additional funded hours entirely.

Support through the tax-free childcare system is still completely regressive: the more you can afford to save, the more support you get from the government. Children attending PVI early years settings still cannot access “free school meals”. And despite recent increases to the Early Years Pupil Premium, the support for eligible children is still nowhere near their primary counterparts.

The truth is that unless the government is willing to go further, and look at wholesale reforms of early years policy, we will simply be left tinkering at the edges of what is a broken system.

In the foreword to the Child Poverty Strategy, Prime Minister Keir Starmer expresses his belief that “it is a fundamental British value that our children should go as far as their talent takes them”.

I agree – but without fair access to high-quality early education, this simply isn’t possible. And so, when it comes to doing what’s needed to ensure that all children get the best start in life, I urge ministers to be brave, bold and unashamedly ambitious. Our children deserve nothing less.



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TIM MCLACHLAN IS CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF NDNA

“We’re risking a race to the bottom”

*The broken local authority funding system is pitching parents against providers, says **Tim McLachlan**...*

When the Labour government replaced the words “free childcare” with “government-funded childcare”, we breathed a sigh of relief – because it moved away from misleading promises. Sadly, barely weeks later, they had changed their rhetoric along with their delivery guidance, promising parents “cheaper childcare” and an end to “rip-off nurseries”.

Since then, NDNA has been helping members across the country who feel they are being overwhelmed and overly restricted by their local authority’s interpretation of this guidance. Why is this happening and how can we reach a resolution that works for everyone?

THE PROBLEM

The DfE does not appear to be “policing” its own guidance. Instead, it is giving councils more powers to “supervise” how providers deliver the entitlement, resulting in a postcode lottery and a lack of consistency. NDNA has called for a stronger, national approach. For years we have documented the damaging effects of a broken funding system, in which some councils retain millions of pounds of early years money that never reaches providers. We are starting to analyse our latest investigation into council underspends, and it’s clear that this issue is getting worse, with double the number of councils underspending by more than £1 million in early years.

WHEN DID THIS START?

Charges for meals and consumables have always been voluntary, but until recently, there was more understanding of how nurseries needed to meet these extra costs. The system was designed around the assumption that parents would purchase additional hours and services, enabling settings to remain viable.

Some councils retain millions of pounds of early years money

The landscape changed when some parents complained to their ombudsman, which culminated in high-profile fines for some councils. Last year, Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole (BCP) appealed its fine. The High Court found in favour of the complainant: that it was unlawful to make mandatory charges to access an early years place. Providers could not charge top-up fees or make parents pay for additional hours.

Facing potential fines, councils have been auditing providers and, in some cases, imposing punitive rules. Some (including Cheshire West/Chester and Havering) forced providers to sign agreements they felt they couldn’t comply with, but had to accept to receive the funding.

Parents have been pitched against providers, who have railed against packed lunches and hours that don’t fit their settings.

Nurseries in Havering were forced to create a “two-tier” system, explaining what parents who agreed to pay charges would receive compared

with those who did not. This was also prohibited.

This situation doesn’t benefit anyone and could result in a race to the bottom, where anything that makes a nursery stand out or gives children more rounded experiences is deemed as “optional” and therefore can’t be done due to the unrecoverable costs.

WHERE NEXT?

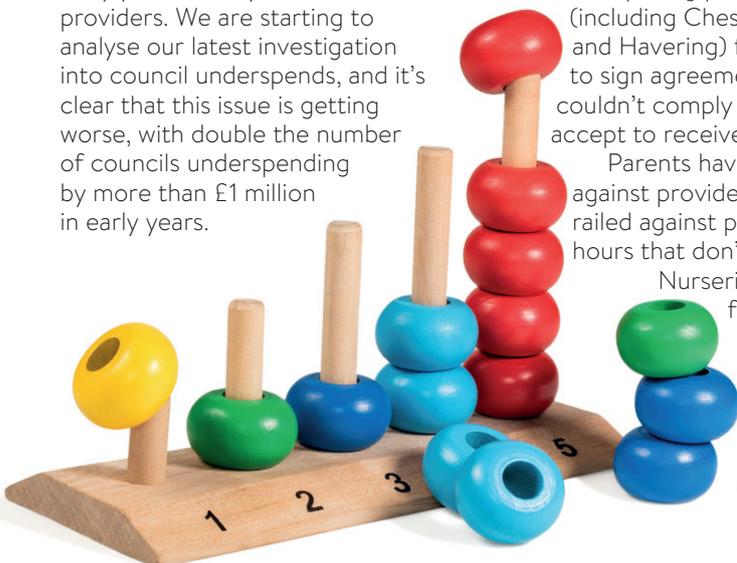
There are solutions. It’s vital nurseries have good representation, such as national organisations like NDNA, but also locally, through networks or your Schools Forum. I have written to the CEOs of some councils that have caused hardships and met with councillors. We have advised nursery networks and raised their issues with the press to put pressure on these councils to support their nurseries.

Know the guidance well, so you can stand firm if you believe your council is overstepping. Part of the ruling from the BCP case was that providers can choose when they offer funded hours (tinyurl.com/TEYbpcc), which nurseries can quote if they need to.

We continue to raise concerns about Ofsted inspecting nurseries more rigorously on nutritional value and mealtime safety where councils insist parents can provide their own food. The government must pay for meals for children in nursery all day if they don’t want parents to foot the bill. They currently fund meals for nurseries in schools; this must be extended to all providers, as is the case in Scotland.

NDNA promotes to parents that this scheme is underfunded and some aspects are unfunded; that “extras” like meals are essentials. Nursery employers can download our upcoming packed-lunch policy template and letters to parents explaining why the charges benefit their children.

For more information and support, visit ndna.org.uk





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NIKKY SMEDLEY IS A WRITER, EDUCATOR AND PASSIONATE ADVOCATE FOR THE CHILD

HOW TO SPEAK CHILD

Acknowledge growth

WHAT DO YOU WANT GROWN-UPS TO LEARN ABOUT YOU?

“That I’m not a baby any more.”

I’ve always enjoyed those occasions when a very earnest four-year-old, or similar, explains to me that they are now too grown-up to watch Teletubbies or some such other pastime that they now deem babyish and below their sophisticated years – if only they knew! Charming and amusing as it may be for us grown-ups, every increment of getting older is a serious issue for young children. I expect you remember the all-important “and a quarter” it was imperative to

We can easily fall behind the curve of a child’s ongoing development

state when one’s age still languished in single figures. We should take note of this, and ask ourselves, what is the child actually saying?

To my mind, they are laying claim to the business of growth. They are letting us know that we shouldn’t take for granted that the things they may have enjoyed or revered in the past are still to their taste. They are claiming their right to change. This may seem an obvious point, but it can be easy to overlook, to forget or even to dismiss.

It’s a question of proportion, of course. To a 30-year-old, three months is a mere 120th of their lived experience, but to a three-year-old, that’s just over eight per cent of their entire lives – no wonder that “and a quarter” matters so much.

The important thing for us is not to get seduced into defining children as extrovert/introvert/bright/slow, etc. – or even attaching behavioural labels such as “doesn’t like to play outdoors” or “finds it hard to make friends” or “hates peas”



without reminding ourselves that this may not always be the case.

When we spend a lot of time with a child over a long duration, we can easily fall behind the curve of their ongoing development. With our less vibrant adult brains we can easily look at that young human in front of us and see the person we knew at the beginning of our relationship with them, or the one from last year, or last week, and not the person who is actually standing there right now, today.

As with so many things it’s about observation, but, helpfully, children are pretty proficient at letting us know what it is they want us to notice – if we are open to receiving the message. It’s up to us to find ways to show them that we understand and want to encourage them in their personal development.

In some situations this support is more imperative. None of us want to behave in ways that reinforce negative ideas in our children, whether it’s being frightened of the dark or repulsed by pasta. We can help by reassuring them that although the current feeling or opinion is perfectly valid, it doesn’t have to define them, and they may change their minds in the future. This approach is much more effective than just telling them not to be silly. It can also be helpful to offer an example – along the lines of, “I hated mushrooms when I was young, but now they’re my favourite vegetable”, or better still, use a story of how one of their peers had a similar turnaround.

Lastly, never underestimate the power of humour in these situations. There is no greater lesson than learning to laugh at oneself and one’s personal mores in order to help dispel such fears, both in the present and the future.

Nikky’s book *Create, Perform, Teach!* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, £15.99) is available now on Amazon.

LEARN MORE

Nikky heads up the How to Speak Child initiative and has been collecting interviews with children about how adults communicate with them. To find out more, you can...



Head to the How to Speak Child blog, at howtospeakchild.com/blog



Join her Facebook page at facebook.com/Howtospeakchild



GEMMA KIRBY MSC IS AN EXPERIENCED BY EDUCATOR AND LEADER

“Your wellbeing matters for PSED”

Good mental health underpins adults’ ability to support children’s emotional regulation, explains Gemma Kirby...

Early years practitioners are highly skilled at supporting children’s personal, social and emotional development (PSED). They help children make sense of feelings, support emotional regulation, and create environments where young children feel safe, valued and understood. Yet one crucial element of this emotional ecosystem is still too often overlooked: the mental health and wellbeing of the adults doing this work.

Research across early years, education and psychology consistently shows that children’s emotional security is closely linked to the emotional availability of the adults who care for them. When practitioners feel supported, regulated and emotionally resourced, children benefit from calmer interactions, more sensitive responses and more secure attachments. When practitioners are overwhelmed, exhausted or emotionally depleted, maintaining that same level of emotional attunement becomes significantly harder. Qualitative research with early years practitioners working across nurseries, school-based settings and childminding highlights a clear and consistent message: practitioner wellbeing is not a “nice to have”. It is foundational to high-quality PSED.

EMOTIONAL AVAILABILITY

PSED is not delivered solely through planned activities or structured interventions. It is

built moment by moment through everyday interactions: tone of voice, facial expressions, responsiveness and emotional consistency. Practitioners frequently describe how their own mental health shapes these interactions in subtle but meaningful ways.

Across settings, practitioners report that when they feel emotionally well, they are more patient, playful and present in their interactions with children. On more difficult days, many notice a shift towards prioritising routines and tasks over emotional connection. This is not about reduced commitment or professionalism, but about emotional capacity.

Emotional energy is often described as a finite resource. Supporting children through distress, managing transitions, responding to families and working within stretched staffing ratios all draw on that resource. When it becomes depleted, emotional availability requires conscious effort rather than flowing naturally.

This has clear implications for children. Attachment theory and developmental psychology consistently show that young children rely on emotionally attuned adults to feel secure enough to explore, learn and regulate their emotions.

Calm, responsive adult behaviour supports children’s emotional regulation, while adult stress or withdrawal can increase emotional dysregulation in young children.

EMOTIONAL CONTAGION

A common theme across practitioner accounts is how quickly children respond to adult emotional states. Practitioners describe how calmness, stress or tension can shape the emotional atmosphere of a room. When adults feel



regulated, children tend to settle more easily; when adults feel overwhelmed, behaviour can escalate more quickly. This dynamic is particularly evident in early years environments, where children are highly sensitive to non-verbal cues and rely on adults for co-regulation. Emotional contagion, the unconscious transmission of emotions between people, plays a powerful role in these settings.

Almost one in four practitioners has taken time off due to work-related stress

For childminders, the effect can be intensified by working alone. Without colleagues to share emotional load or step in during challenging moments, emotional strain can accumulate. Research suggests that isolation, combined with high responsibility, places additional pressure on emotional wellbeing, which can affect the emotional climate children experience throughout the day.

EMOTIONAL SUPPRESSION

Many early years practitioners describe a strong sense of responsibility for children's emotional wellbeing. Emotional availability is closely tied to professional identity, with warmth, patience and consistency seen as core markers of good practice. At the same time, early years work involves significant emotional labour: the ongoing regulation of emotions to meet professional expectations. Practitioners are expected to remain calm, positive and emotionally responsive regardless of personal stress, fatigue or anxiety.

Within this context, some practitioners report feeling guilty when they perceive themselves as falling short emotionally, even when children's needs are met appropriately. Professional cultures that equate competence with emotional control can make it difficult to acknowledge emotional strain openly, increasing the risk of emotional suppression and burnout.

SECTOR-WIDE STRAINS

These experiences sit within a wider sector context that has been under sustained strain. National workforce data indicates that early years education is characterised by high turnover, with around 15% of staff leaving their roles each year, and many leaving the profession altogether. High turnover affects continuity of care and the stable relationships that underpin children's emotional security.

Surveys of the early years workforce highlight widespread emotional strain. The Early Years Alliance reports that over half of practitioners experience work-related anxiety, more than a quarter report symptoms of depression, and nearly half say that stress affects their performance at work. Almost one in four practitioners has taken time off due to work-related stress.

Structural factors contribute significantly to this picture, including long working hours, limited breaks, high accountability demands and comparatively low pay. When combined with the emotional labour inherent in early years work, these conditions make sustaining emotional availability particularly challenging.

Crucially, this is not only a workforce issue. When practitioners are emotionally depleted, it becomes harder to provide the calm, responsive interactions that support children's personal, social and emotional development.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR CHILDREN

Supporting practitioner wellbeing is not a distraction from children's outcomes; it is a pathway to them. When practitioners feel emotionally supported, children benefit from calmer environments, more consistent relationships and more responsive emotional care. Over time, this supports children's emotional regulation, confidence and social competence.

Early years practice has long recognised the importance of relationships for children. Applying that same relational lens to the adults who do this work is both ethically and pedagogically essential. Practitioner wellbeing is not separate from PSED; it is the foundation upon which it is built.

SEVEN WAYS TO SUPPORT PRACTITIONER WELLBEING

If practitioner wellbeing underpins children's PSED, then supporting it should be a core element of quality early years provision. While systemic change is essential, settings can take practical steps that help protect emotional wellbeing:

- 1 Normalise emotional conversations** – create a culture where discussing emotional load and stress is acceptable and supported.
- 2 Build in reflective spaces** – offer supervision or reflective practice sessions that focus on emotional experiences, not only performance.
- 3 Protect breaks and boundaries** – where possible, ensure staff can take breaks and discourage out-of-hours communication becoming routine.
- 4 Acknowledge emotional labour** – recognise emotional labour as a core component of early years practice.
- 5 Support leaders' wellbeing** – room leaders and managers shape emotional culture; supporting them benefits entire teams.
- 6 Include wellbeing in training** – professional development should address adult emotional regulation alongside children's.
- 7 Reduce isolation for childminders** – peer networks and regular check-ins can help counter professional isolation.



Has Ofsted Listened?

Inspectors are taking a new approach – but is it enough to support practitioners and build trust in the system? Abigail Fleary shares her view...

For those of us who have experienced the dreaded words “Ofsted’s coming”, there is no comparable feeling of impending doom. As a teacher in a single-form-entry school I was solely responsible for the entire early years provision, so I know it well. I loved my job and I loved those children, so what was it about Ofsted that made me (and so many other teachers) feel so afraid? Was it that I was being judged, or simply the fear of being told that my best wasn’t good enough? In my experience – and I was not alone – it was not a supportive process. It got me thinking: why are we putting teachers through this, and is it actually helping?

Four years on from my first inspection, Ofsted has started to evolve, sadly due in part to the tragic death of Ruth Perry. That was a stark reminder that something had to change and quickly. But what does this new evolution of Ofsted look like? How is it going to support early years practitioners and build up our trust? Imagine a day when you actually look forward to a visit. When you are confident in what the inspector is looking for, knowing they’re going to celebrate the wonderful things you do on a daily basis. When their feedback will help you to reflect on and improve the parts you haven’t done – yet. Isn’t this the service we need to deliver the best outcomes for children?

That’s exactly how Ofsted wants its new framework to operate, but has it succeeded?

MAKING CHANGES

In 2024, Ofsted launched the Big Listen, inviting professionals across the sector to feed back on their experiences. In response, the inspectorate has brought out a new inspection toolkit, which came into effect in November 2025. It also introduced a new operating guide and inspection information. These documents include changes that Ofsted hopes will make inspections more collaborative and supportive. Here, I want to consider four of them in particular:

- A more collaborative approach
- A bigger focus on wellbeing
- A bigger focus on inclusion
- Individual gradings – not overall judgements

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

What’s changed? Ofsted will conduct shared observations and increase ongoing professional dialogue with leaders throughout an inspection. Leaders will be allowed to accompany the inspector at all times, where they are able to do so. Ofsted has put much more emphasis on ensuring its values of professionalism, empathy, courtesy and respect are demonstrated by inspectors. It has also put in additional training for inspectors to ensure that there is a consistent approach across the sector. Providers are encouraged to leave feedback on how their inspection was conducted and how they felt these values were shown.

The impact: As practitioners, this change gives us a voice. It allows us to provide context to observations and explain how and why our settings are run the way they are. I know that during my own inspection experience, this change would have really helped me to feel that I was a valuable part of the process. Crucially, inviting feedback provides the opportunity for practitioners to reflect on their experience and allows Ofsted to continue to improve its service. This ongoing reflective practice may be a key component in building trust.





FOCUS ON WELLBEING

What's changed? Ofsted has acknowledged the massive impact an inspection can have on the mental health and wellbeing of practitioners, and has made the following changes. The notification call will now be before 10 am. Leaders will send useful information via email, instead of giving it on the notification call. A second planning phone call will take place later that day. This is an opportunity to discuss the curriculum overview as well as the strengths and priorities of the setting. This will replace the learning walk, which previously took place on the day of inspection. Alongside this, inspectors now receive training on wellbeing and mental health to help them spot signs of stress and anxiety. Ofsted has also introduced a policy designed to protect staff wellbeing, enabling senior inspectors to pause inspections in the event of an unforeseen incident.

The impact: In my opinion these changes could help to relieve the immediate pressure on leaders. It gives time for the words "Ofsted's coming" to sink in and allows settings to prepare. It's reassuring to know that inspectors have acknowledged the stress an inspection can cause. I think this is a strong step in rebuilding the relationship between inspectors and practitioners.

FOCUS ON INCLUSION

What's changed? Inclusion has become a distinct area in the new inspection toolkit. Inspectors will look at how settings make early and accurate assessment of needs and

The new system allows for the strengths of a setting to be celebrated

how these are reflected in planning. These children may be selected in case sampling during the inspection, so inspectors can see what a typical day looks like for a child with additional needs. Inspectors will also consider how settings build relationships with parents and carers, and how external providers are used to support inclusion. They will consider whether settings have high expectations for all children and how barriers to learning are reduced.

The impact: In my experience, inclusion is one of the biggest challenges a setting can face. Issues around funding, staffing or early assessment can pose big barriers to getting the right help for vulnerable children. However, this area gives practitioners a platform to explain their rationale behind their decisions and provides an opportunity to have professional dialogues about challenges and successes. Historically, we've feared receiving poor feedback due to behavioural challenges or high SEN needs; hopefully this change can give us confidence in our professional judgement.

INDIVIDUAL GRADINGS

What's changed? Ofsted realised that one overall judgement caused a lot

of harm in some cases. Its response is to totally reframe the way inspectors grade a setting. Using the toolkit there is now a five-point grading scale: *Urgent improvement, Needs attention, Expected standard, Strong standard, and Exceptional*. For each area, a setting will receive an individual grading (this doesn't apply to safeguarding, which is either *Not met* or *Met*). The rationale behind this is to recognise all the great things a setting is doing. Inspectors are now expected to celebrate strengths, validate leaders' priorities and highlight areas for improvement.

The impact: Although you are still being graded, I think this move reduces the high-stakes pressure of a single judgement. The new system allows for a setting's successes to be celebrated, while allowing areas for improvement to be highlighted. In essence, it turns inspection into a developmental tool, as opposed to a pass or fail.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It's going to take time and consistency to rewrite the relationship between early years practitioners and inspectors. We do need to have a regulatory body, so we will always have a level of scrutiny within our roles. I feel the toolkit offers greater transparency to inspections; hopefully the changes will help us to reflect, improve, and most of all feel valued for the amazing things we do.

If you would like to learn more about the changes, I very much recommend watching Ofsted's webinars on YouTube from @ofstednews, which go into much more detail.

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Schools



Five ways to follow the Montessori method

It needn't be expensive to practise the principles of one of the world's most influential educators, says Dr Helen Edwards...

The name Maria Montessori is synonymous with beautiful settings featuring natural materials and specialist resources, but in these cash-strapped times it can feel unattainable. However, many early years educators are following Montessori principles without even realising it. If you enter a setting and see low, open shelving, children pouring their own water, or an educator kneeling to observe rather than standing to “teach”, you are seeing the living legacy of the Montessori method. Here are five approaches you may wish to try that don't need investment in expensive resources.

1 Real materials
Montessori famously eschewed “pretend” plastic toys in favour of real, purposeful materials. Compared to plastic, she felt wooden materials offered a “sensory honesty” with weight, varied textures, and distinct scents. You might introduce small china jugs for pouring, metal spoons and pans for cooking, or an area for real woodworking tools.

Some Montessori educators extol the value of “loose parts” such as stones or shells for supporting development and learning. These can be sourced easily and help to ground children's learning in reality. For example, the physical experience of holding a heavy stone compared to a feather helps a child to

learn about weight more profoundly.

2 Observe and guide
Early years education is underpinned by observing the child and what interests them. We act as guides or facilitators – not to disturb a child's “flow” but to wait for the “teachable moment” or to offer a prompt that scaffolds the child's self-chosen discovery. This mirrors Montessori principles, where the educator steps back to see what a child is interested in before they intervene.

3 Child-led learning
Perhaps Montessori's greatest contribution to the early years is the emphasis on “following the child”. Rather than tightly defined curriculum statements that all children must complete, provision is planned according to a child's interests and level of development. For example, if a child is playing with dinosaurs in the sand, a Montessori-aligned teacher doesn't force them to leave the sandpit to do a maths activity elsewhere. Instead, they bring maths to the child, asking questions like “How many dinosaur footprints can we make?”

This respects the child's “sensitive periods” (tinyurl.com/TEYmnts) – those windows of time where they are primed to learn specific skills through the lens of their current passion.

By mapping your planning to a child's fascinations, you're following the Montessori method of individualised, child-led learning.

4 The prepared environment
The Montessori prepared environment is a carefully designed classroom that fosters independence, order, and self-directed learning, with everything purposefully placed and child-sized. Offering accessible, continuous provision that has been specifically curated to support your children's learning allows them to return to the same activity frequently. They know where to find resources they need and this fosters the deep concentration Montessori called “the work of the child” (tinyurl.com/TEYmntp).

Providing low shelves where resources are clearly labelled serves the need for autonomy, and keeping similar items grouped in baskets provides a sense of order to help the child feel secure and independent.

5 Independent learning
“Help me to do it myself” is a well-known Montessori mantra and another that's easy to implement. For instance, helping children to develop their practical life skills by letting them learn to put on their coats or giving them small dustpans and brushes to clear up their own spills.

It's about stepping back when a child struggles to fit the puzzle piece and allowing them to solve it themselves and experience the “Aha!” moment. It shifts the goal from “getting it right” to the joy of discovery and helps build a child's identity as a competent problem solver.

Dr Helen Edwards is co-founder of Tapestry and a former nursery owner. Recently, she interviewed Karen Chetwynd, CEO of Montessori Global Education, to discuss how the philosophy is relevant for all children. Find it at tapestry.info/podcasts





SAL MCKEOWN IS A FREELANCE EDITOR AND JOURNALIST

Young children need healthier food

With their charges' wellbeing on the line, early years settings must serve nutritious meals, says Sal McKeown...

More than one in 10 children are starting primary school already obese. This NHS announcement (tinyurl.com/TEYnhs1) has understandably caused consternation, though some professionals are questioning the judgement, especially with its references to body mass index (BMI). "It doesn't differentiate the body composition, whether it's protein we're looking at or fat or even bone density," notes Avni Vyas, senior lecturer in nutrition & dietetics at Manchester Metropolitan University. BMI is based on white children. The acceptable weight for the African Caribbean population needs to be higher because they have more muscle mass, while for South Asian children, the cut-off point between normal and overweight should be lower.

Taking the announcement at face value, it's important to recognise that parents need support. It's easy to blame families, but children may receive half their daily calories outside the home. Looking at the webpages of different nurseries around the UK, I found many carb-laden menus with little in the way of fruit and vegetables. The government talked about healthy eating, but children at free breakfast clubs were frequently offered toast and jam, bagels and cereals. Schools voted with their feet and ministers raised the allowance per child from 60p to £1, plus £25 per day to cover staffing and admin costs (tinyurl.com/TEYbrkcl).

Of course, weight isn't the only issue. Avni's colleague Eirini Koutrouli runs a public health project in Salford promoting healthy lifestyles in the early

years. They are identifying children with obesity and sleep apnoea, but also finding those who are malnourished despite having a healthy BMI. "They'll be iron-deficient, vitamin D-deficient, calcium-deficient – deficiencies that will impact their health, and also their behaviour and their ability to focus," says Eirini.

For both of these reasons, if children are regularly eating breakfast and lunch in schools and nurseries, those settings have a responsibility to serve them healthy, nutritious food.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Food offerings in nurseries are mixed. Options such as fresh fruit, vegetables, and lean proteins are often more expensive. Settings also face time pressures, limited kitchen facilities, food safety rules, allergy management, and the realities of children's eating behaviours. If nursery staff are cooking and serving food, they may opt for items they can pop in the oven and leave or microwave quickly. Fast foods score highly here: they list ingredients and allergens and require few skills to prepare. "Often, the menu is driven by wastage," says Avni. "These are the



	Main meals (five days)	Vegetarian options (five days)	Vegetables over the week	Dessert
Nursery 1	Pork sausages Breaded chicken fillet Sausage rolls Breaded fish fingers 50/50 pasta with tomato sauce and cheese	Plant-based sausages Breaded Quorn fillet Veggie Sausage rolls Plant-based fish fingers Vegetable crudités	Peas Green beans Sweetcorn Carrots Baked beans Salad always available	Vegan chocolate brownie Ice cream Sorbet Jelly Fruit always available
Nursery 2	Pizza of the day Chicken meatballs with pasta Chicken hotdog Salmon fishcake Roast chicken with Yorkshire pudding	Cheese and potato pie Quorn dippers Cheese whirl Quorn pasta bolognaise Roast vegetable pasta bake	Peas Baked beans Carrots Sweetcorn	Pineapple sponge Carrot cake Cookies of the day Lemon sponge Chocolate brownie Yoghurt or fresh fruit always available

foods that they know the children will eat.”

By way of example, the table above shows a week’s offering from two nurseries, one in the Midlands, one in the Southeast. Both provided potatoes, rice or chips at each meal. The main meals are enhanced with breadcrumb coatings, colourings and flavourings. The vegetable selection is limited (especially in Nursery 2), which may have consequences for vitamins and folic acid. Both offer sweet options every day, providing yet more sugar.

TRANSFORMING NUTRITION

Nursery food doesn’t have to be like this, and not all of it is. I interviewed two providers committed to healthy eating. Arlene Caddow owns three private settings in Bradford upon Avon, and each has its own qualified chef. She avoids shop-bought bread and breakfast cereals. The children make bread every day, including focaccia, which, with the addition of raw veg, can become a work of art (tinyurl.com/TEYfoca). Breakfasts include egg and salmon, poached eggs, egg and bacon, natural yoghurt and berries, Mexican refried beans, porridge with cinnamon and sometimes honey. At lunch, there is a bowl of vegetables on the table every day as a starter. In winter, children might have home-made soups and wraps. They purchase wraps that use a minimum number of ingredients and no additives. Dessert is fruit and yoghurt.

Children may receive half their daily calories outside the home

“We have a different way of thinking,” Arlene explains. “In many settings, if they want to reward or treat a child, they opt for a cake or sweets. We don’t celebrate a birthday with a cake; we celebrate with a fruit platter shaped like a dragon or butterfly.” During Covid, the nurseries delivered food to families, and they have expanded this to a takeaway service, so now parents can order a meal from the chef and collect it at pickup time.

Arlene feels that food is only one part of the equation when it comes to obesity, though. Their biggest problem with overweight children is exercise. “Children spend too much time in front of screens,” she says. “It requires less effort by parents.” The nurseries counteract this with active sessions every week: yoga, a sports class, and swimming classes; there is also forest school, where children might spend the day outside with a lunch of home-made soup and wraps they have helped to create.

Sonia Aziz is manager of Abu Bakr nursery in Walsall, graded “Outstanding” at its last two Ofsted inspections. Children bring their own breakfast and lunch from home, while the nursery provides milk and water at break times, morning and afternoon, along with a snack such as

fruit, vegetables or breadsticks with cream cheese. Many of the children come from Bengali, Gujarati, Afghan, or Pakistani backgrounds. Staff are bilingual and can explain to parents how to make healthier versions of foods their children already enjoy. This might involve lower-fat versions of rich sauces, substituting brown or 50/50 flour for white when making roti or bread. Some children may still be having a predominantly milk-based diet. A Weetabix with milk for breakfast may mean they are not hungry at lunchtime. Other children will just be eating soft foods. When staff identify a potential speech and language concern, they ask families to introduce more crunchy, chewy food to strengthen the child’s jaw muscles.

The nursery reinforces healthy-eating messages in its newsletters. They have covered portion size, how to create balanced meals by including foods from the four main food groups (fruit and vegetables, carbohydrates, protein, and dairy), and the importance of offering a varied menu. Despite their guidance, sometimes children bring in unsuitable food. The nursery will send the item home with a tactfully worded explanation slip. If parents still send unhealthy or inadequate lunchboxes, staff will suggest alternatives such as pasta, jacket potatoes or a portion from the evening meal. “We are a Food for Life Nursery,” says Sonia (foodforlife.org.uk). “We put stepping stones in place to support our parents. Our aim is to ensure that families feel we are working in partnership with them, rather than policing their choices.”



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SUNIL MATTA IS THE AUTHOR OF NIMA & EARTHY

6 ways to inspire environmental empathy

The early years are the perfect time to help children build a lasting positive relationship with our planet, says Sunil Matta...

Young children are naturally empathetic, curious and eager to help, making the early years the ideal stage to introduce the concept of environmental care in ways that feel safe, hopeful and empowering. Rather than focusing on large issues, practitioners can support children by helping them connect emotionally with the Earth as something familiar, friendly and worth caring for.

Below are six practical, age-appropriate ideas to try.

1 Make nature part of your routine

Spending time outdoors each day, even briefly, gives children valuable opportunities to notice and connect with nature. Encourage children to observe leaves, insects, clouds, puddles and changes in the weather. Simple questions such as “What can you see?”, “What’s different today?” or “How does it feel outside?” help children slow down, focus and engage more deeply.

Practitioners can introduce a short, consistent “nature-noticing moment” each day. Over time, this builds familiarity and helps children see the Earth as something they know and care about, rather than something abstract.

2 Portray the Earth as a friend

Personifying the Earth can be a powerful way to develop empathy in young children: when our world is described as something that feels happy when cared for, or uncomfortable when it is not, children can better understand why their actions matter.

Using gentle language such as “The Earth feels better when we look after it” supports emotional

development without creating fear. This approach helps children learn kindness and responsibility in a way that’s appropriate for their age.

3 Create a connection with stories

Stories play a central role in early years learning and are especially effective for exploring environmental themes. Stories that give the Earth or nature a voice allow children to form emotional connections and understand ideas at a deeper level.

As a children’s author, I have written short stories that use personification to help children feel and understand the impact of everyday actions. In one example, the Earth feels uncomfortable because water is being wasted. A child notices this, takes simple steps to save water and, in doing so, helps the Earth feel better. Through storytelling, children learn that even small actions can have a meaningful effect.

4 Link learning to real life

Many schools regularly take part in Walk to School initiatives, providing an ideal opportunity to explore environmental care in a meaningful, real-life context. Walking instead of travelling by car can be introduced as a positive choice that helps the Earth feel healthier and happier.

In one illustrated story from my book, a young character notices that the Earth feels unwell because of pollution from traffic.

When he chooses

to walk instead, the Earth begins to feel better. Sharing stories like this allows teachers to open gentle discussions about pollution and clean air in an age-appropriate way, helping children understand how their everyday choices can make a difference.

5 Focus on achievable actions

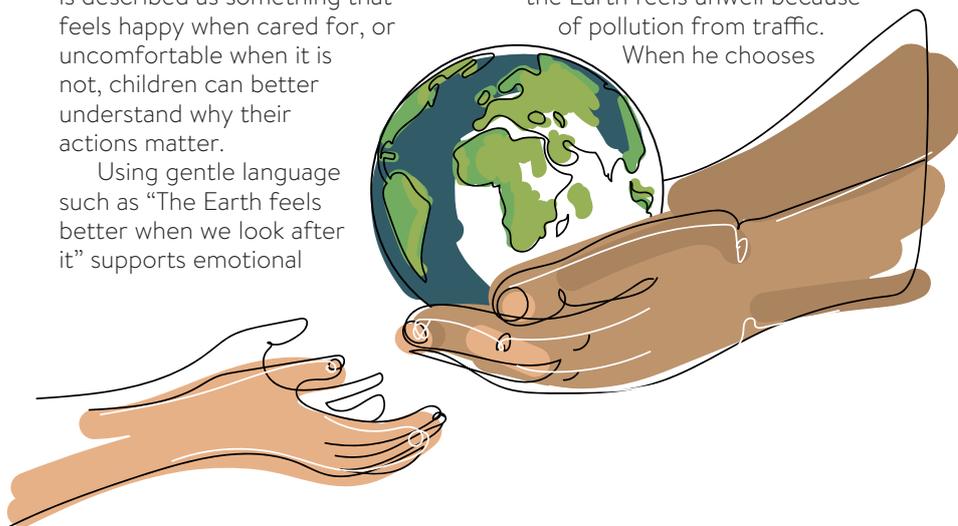
Environmental care should always feel achievable for young children. Simple actions such as putting litter in the correct bin, turning off taps, reusing materials or caring for plants help them feel capable and involved.

Linking these actions back to caring for the Earth as a friend reinforces understanding, creates a sense of responsibility, and builds habits that can last a lifetime.

6 Model green behaviour

Children learn by observing the adults around them. Practitioners can model environmentally friendly behaviour through daily routines, such as switching off lights, reusing resources, walking short distances or caring for outdoor spaces.

Talking through these actions is particularly effective. Explanations like “I’m turning off the light to help the Earth” help children connect actions with outcomes and understand that caring for the environment is something we do every day.



Nima & Earthy is a picture book featuring short stories that help young children emotionally connect with the Earth and understand how small, positive actions can help care for the environment. Visit tinyurl.com/TEYNima

NIMA & EARTHY
Little Heroes Save The Planet
Our Earth, Our Home
S. Matta



ANN-MARIE PIPER IS AN EARLY YEARS EDUCATOR & EYFS APPRENTICESHIP TUTOR

Early learning in a digital world

It's time to move beyond the screen-time debate and adapt to today's tech-filled childhood, says Ann-Marie Piper...

Spend a little time in early years spaces online and it quickly becomes clear that conversations about digital technology often circle back to one thing: screen time limits. As a Reception teacher, this was something I regularly found myself wrestling with. How do we acknowledge the digital world children are growing up in, while also ensuring they are not simply sitting back and passively consuming?

Over time, I realised the answer wasn't about removing digital experiences altogether. Ignoring them often felt more uncomfortable than engaging with them. Digital technology isn't something children suddenly encounter later on; it is already woven into their everyday lives, shaping how they play, communicate and make sense of the world around them.

This influence often becomes visible in play. A group of children carefully building with blocks might pause to "take a photo" of their creation, holding up imaginary devices and discussing what they

can see. Others gather round, offering suggestions before the building begins again. No screen is involved, yet the influence of the digital world is clear, supporting storytelling, reflection and collaboration rather than replacing play itself.

What matters, then, is not whether digital experiences exist in early years settings, but how they are used. When approached thoughtfully, digital tools can become shared, playful experiences explored alongside adults, rather than something children are left alone with. Used in this way, technology has the potential to enhance learning, spark curiosity and support communication.

As early years educators, our role has always been about preparing children for the world they are growing

into, not the one we grew up in. Digital technology is now part of that world. By engaging with it intentionally and reflectively, we can help children develop the skills, confidence and understanding they need, while still holding firmly on to the values at the heart of early years practice.

WHAT IS A "DIGITAL CHILDHOOD"?

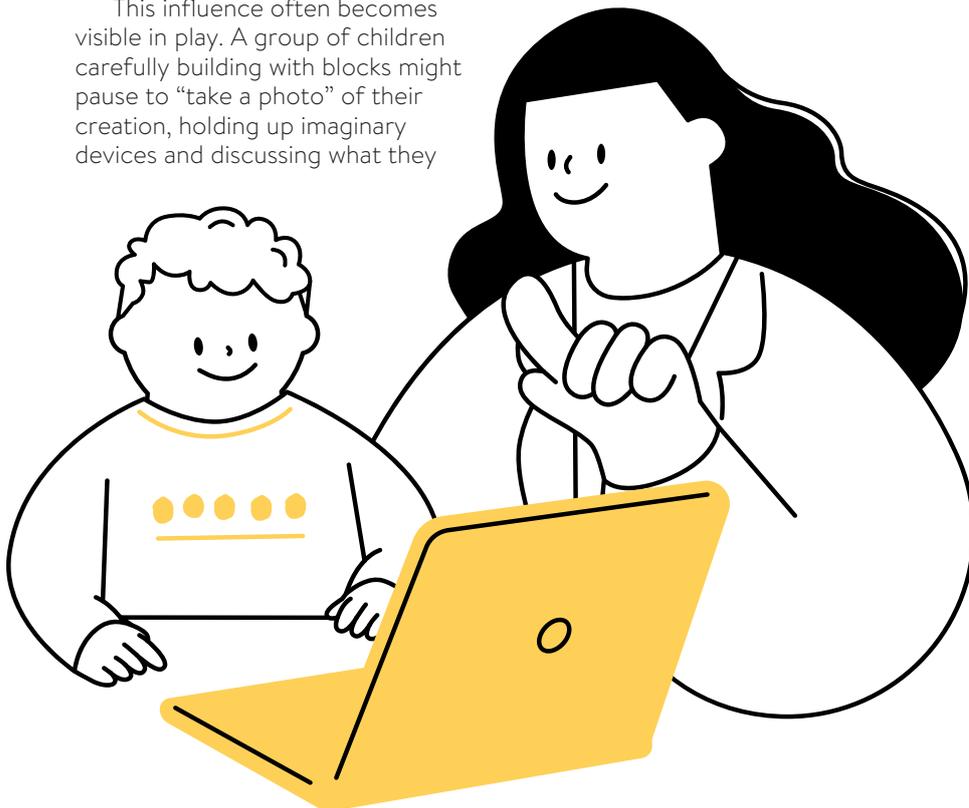
When we talk about a digital childhood, it's helpful to move beyond thinking solely about devices and screen time. Instead, it can be understood through children's everyday lived experiences: the ordinary moments where technology supports connection, communication and meaning-making.

For many young children, digital experiences are already embedded in family life. This might look like video calling a grandparent, taking photos of a day out, listening to a favourite story, or noticing digital signage in the community. These experiences are familiar, purposeful and often shared with others.

Crucially, these moments position children as active participants rather than passive consumers. Children use digital tools to tell stories, revisit experiences and make sense of the world around them. Research into digital literacies has highlighted that young children's meaning-making is multimodal, combining talk, movement, images, sound and gesture, with digital experiences often supporting this rich communication rather than replacing it.

Understanding digital childhood in this way allows practitioners to recognise what children already bring into settings and to build on these experiences within play-based, relationship-led practice.

Reflective prompt: *What digital experiences are children already*



referencing in their play, and how might these connect with their communication and storytelling?

DIGITAL EXPERIENCES

No matter how quickly technology evolves, digital play will never replace blocks, role play, mark making or outdoor exploration, nor should it try to. These experiences remain central to early years practice. The opportunity lies in finding meaningful ways to integrate digital technology so that it enhances children's play rather than pulling them away from it.

When introduced with intention, digital tools can help children explore, revisit and extend their ideas. A tablet might be used to photograph a block structure, prompting discussion about how it was built. Digital storytelling apps can sit alongside small-world play, supporting children to retell familiar stories or invent new ones using physical resources. Recording children's voices as they narrate their play allows them to listen back, reflect and build shared narratives over time.

I saw this come to life in my own practice when a small group of children became absorbed in re-enacting a digital story we had explored earlier in the week. Using loose parts, fabric and small-world figures, the children recreated scenes, negotiated roles and adapted the storyline as they played. The digital experience acted as a starting point, but it was child-led play, collaboration and sustained conversation that carried the learning forward.

These moments highlight the continuity between physical and digital worlds, where technology supports playful exploration rather than interrupting it.

THE EDUCATOR'S ROLE

At the heart of high-quality early years education are strong, responsive relationships built through meaningful interactions. When it comes to digital experiences, it is rarely about the technology itself, but rather how adults use it to support learning, play and communication.

Instead of asking how we keep children away from digital tools, we can shift towards co-viewing, co-playing and co-creating. This means joining children in their digital explorations,

modelling language, asking questions and scaffolding ideas. Sitting alongside a child while editing photos creates opportunities to narrate choices, think aloud and invite children's perspectives. Digital storytelling becomes a shared space where adults and children revisit stories and extend narratives together.

When educators adopt this co-creative role, digital experiences move away from passive consumption and become opportunities for connection, creativity and sustained shared thinking.

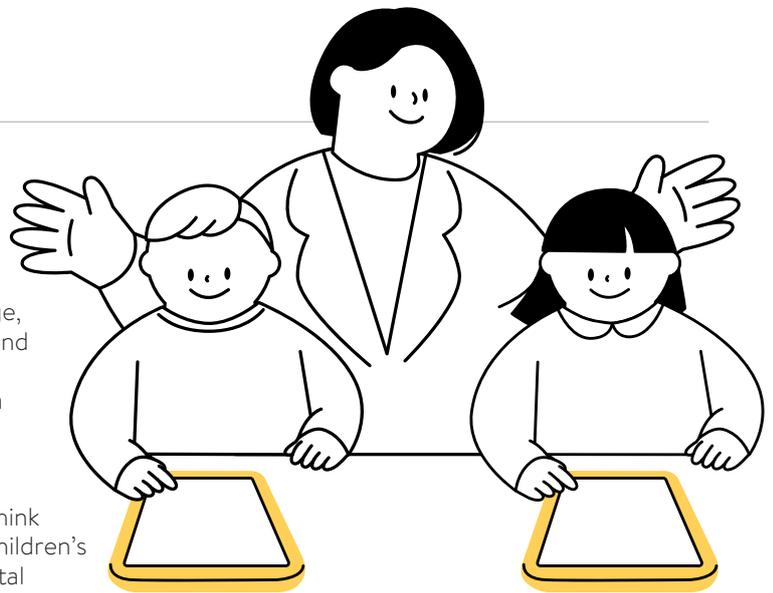
For many young children, digital experiences are already embedded in family life

NAVIGATING CONCERNS

Developing confidence with digital technology requires thoughtful support and training. Although the technology strand has been removed from the EYFS, digital experiences remain a significant part of children's lives. Research suggests that passive or unsafe digital consumption can negatively impact children's wellbeing, highlighting the importance of purposeful adult modelling and guidance.

Practitioners face real challenges, including differences in access to technology, gaps in confidence, and balancing curiosity with safeguarding. However, effective digital pedagogy does not depend on expensive equipment. It depends on how technology is used, not how much it is used.

It is entirely appropriate for practitioners to learn alongside children, experimenting with small, intentional changes rather than feeling pressure to transform practice overnight.



A BALANCED WAY FORWARD

Digital childhood is already here, and early years spaces must embrace the childhoods children are living today. While this new era can feel daunting, with the right training, resources and space to be curious, it is far from something to fear.

When used intentionally, digital experiences can deepen play, communication and connection, enhancing rather than replacing hands-on learning. Our role is to support children to develop a safe, meaningful relationship with technology, laying foundations for confident, curious learners.

By approaching digital experiences through a values-led lens rooted in play, relationships, communication and curiosity, we can ensure technology supports early years pedagogy rather than competing with it.

Find more from Ann-Marie at misspipersplaypod.co.uk

Five ways to support MEANINGFUL DIGITAL EXPERIENCES

- 1 Photograph children's play to support reflection.
- 2 Record children's voices during play.
- 3 Pair digital storytelling with physical resources.
- 4 Model purposeful use through co-creation.
- 5 Use digital tools to revisit learning over time.



KIRSTINE BEELEY IS AN AUTHOR, CONSULTANT, TEACHER AND FORMER SENIOR LECTURER

“It’s not about experiments!”

*Science learning in the early years thrives on environments and materials that spark children’s curiosity and desire to explore, says **Kirstine Beeley**..*

With the early years often operating within different legal frameworks to the rest of a primary school, it’s sometimes difficult for subject leads to understand what their subject looks like in nursery or Reception, which are more play-based and child-led. As a former science co-ordinator and early years trainer with a degree in primary science education, I understand this issue more than most. So, let’s explore how science development is interwoven throughout an early years setting, and how best to explain to leaders that it’s not about a series of adult-led “experiments”. I’ve focused on the four main threads within the science national curriculum in England to illustrate that the foundation years truly are the foundations to scientific learning expected further up the education system. Although these categories aren’t stand-alone within early curriculums, they are embedded in best practice across the early years board.

SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION

Many adults’ experience of science in school centres on “experiments”, with their embedded structure of hypothesis, resources, method, results and conclusion. But science in the early years is different. Our play-based, child-led approaches put children at the centre of their own exploration of the world around them without the need for artificially structured activities. Long gone are the days of “Will it float or will it sink?” questions, as children slowly lose the will to live and dream of the dinosaur world they long to create out in the garden!

Characteristics of effective learning in the EYFS and beyond are rooted in children wanting to ask questions, having ideas, and exploring their own

thinking about the environment around them. With an exciting and engaging setting, they will delve into their natural curiosity and happily explore and experiment to find their own answers and develop their understanding. Our role as educators is to create these open-ended environments and encourage children to ask questions about the world we live in. As well as ensuring that all areas of your environment have maximum science-learning potential all the time, you can create an “investigation station” or a “curiosity corner” specifically to spark interest and develop children’s confidence to ask questions, so that we as adults can support and scaffold them in finding their own answers. Scientific investigation is learning in early years, every day and in every area of provision.

MATERIALS

This arm of science in primary education is about children building their awareness of what objects around them are made of, being able to spot that some have amazing properties, and beginning to understand that some materials work better for certain uses than others. Making sure that areas of provision give children the opportunity to explore with items made from many materials offers this learning potential as children play and explore. Ensuring your sand area or water play includes access to containers made of wood, metals, and both clear and opaque plastic will increase the potential for discussion around materials and their differences. Metals all feel different at room temperature: some are much colder to the touch, some are reflective or shiny, and others are



rough or dull. As adults, our role is to act as scaffolders of language as children play, instead of asking “What’s this made of?” every few minutes.

We should also offer environments in which children can explore how to *change* materials. From mixing cupcakes in a mud kitchen to adding water to paint or porridge, from

awareness of all things living, including plants, animals, and us. In early years, that has to start with providing environments that bring the natural world in, so that

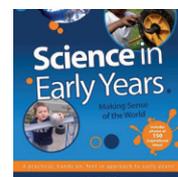
children can interact with it and explore it as they play. Even in the smallest of urban outdoor spaces, it’s simple to plant up pots with flowers, veg and even small trees to encourage wildlife. Thinking about the food chain helps when planning. Having plants and flowers that invite pollinators and other creatures will provide a food source for small mammals and birds. These may, if you’re lucky, tempt larger creatures to your doorstep, such as hedgehogs, foxes and deer. Don’t forget the ways you can enjoy nature indoors as well. Many plants and flowers are easy to grow and maintain inside. Adding flowers, petals and leaves to creation stations, playdough or water trays provides countless opportunities to explore and talk about their different parts.

Finally, we need to make sure that as children play and explore, we’re pointing out the changes in their own bodies – for example, when they are out of breath, their heart is pounding, or they are sweating or shivering. Talking about weather-appropriate clothing and healthy eating is a part of everyday life in early years settings.

SEASONAL CHANGES

We’re lucky in the UK in that we usually experience four very distinct seasons that bring with them obvious changes to both the natural world and materials around us. In early years, this element of science learning focuses on pointing out and exploring these changes in the here and now, rather than trying to throw facts at children and hoping some of them will stick. In winter we explore actual frost and

snow, rather than a perfectly preened tray of fake snow and plastic penguins indoors. In spring we encourage children to plant seeds and to notice the new leaves, catkins or flowers that appear as the weather becomes warmer. As with all the other areas of science exploration, this really is about exploring using all of our senses as changes occur and allowing children to make sense of what they experience, rather than a more traditional “teach facts” approach. In England it’s one of the main reasons the EYFS changed from “Knowledge and understanding of the world” to just “Understanding the world”.



Science in Early Years by Kirstine Beeley is available now at playingtolearn.co.uk – read a review on page 65.

KEY POINTS

- All four of the science elements described in this article are intertwined. They don’t operate in isolation, and if children are able to explore and be curious in an environment that’s enabled for maximum scientific possibility, learning will come.
- Science in early years is *not* about facts and figures but about questions and the sheer joy of being able to explore to try to find answers.
- Science is what we do in early years every day and is at the heart of best practice – even if the children don’t realise it!



Our role is to create open-ended environments and encourage children to ask questions

watching puddles dry up after a storm to changing paint colours in a pot, we can provide situations daily in which children can explore with all of their senses and see first-hand how materials change. Providing cardboard tubes alongside the water tray or paper cups within block play allows children to learn that some things work better for certain uses than others.

THE LIVING WORLD

This really is what it says on the packet – all about developing children’s





Turn your grey spots green



Ali Aspin explains how the National Education Nature Park can help you embrace the outdoor world at your setting...

For young children, the outdoors is far more than a place to play. It's a world of textures, stories, discoveries and questions, a space where curiosity leads learning. The National Education Nature Park (educationnaturepark.org.uk) builds on this instinct, supporting early years settings across England to enhance outdoor spaces, involve children in meaningful environmental action, and nurture a lifelong connection with nature.

Delivered by a partnership led by the Natural History Museum and commissioned by the Department for Education, the National Education Nature Park is a free national programme that helps nurseries, schools and colleges understand their outdoor spaces and turn "grey" areas into greener, more nature-rich environments. Experts from programme partners Learning through Landscapes and the Royal Horticultural Society have tailored the programme for early years, ensuring activities are practical, playful and accessible for even the youngest children. Settings are guided through a simple five-step journey:

- 1 Get to know your space
- 2 Identify opportunities
- 3 Make decisions
- 4 Make change happen
- 5 Record change

Activities range from soil exploration and mini-beast hunts to planting wildflowers and observing seasonal change, all closely aligned with the Early Years Foundation Stage.

A NURSERY TRANSFORMED

One setting already seeing the benefits of the National Education Nature Park is Shenley Fields Nursery School in Birmingham (shenleyfields.sch.life). With a predominantly hard-surfaced outdoor area, the setting began its Nature Park journey with the Habitat Heroes activity (tinyurl.com/TEYhabh). The 141 children and staff team explored the outdoor space together, noticing where wildlife already lived and where improvements could be made.

Using the Habitat Mapper tool (tinyurl.com/TEYhabm), staff created a baseline map of the site to understand their starting point and support discussions about how to increase biodiversity and improve children's daily experiences outdoors. "We used the space at the front of our building, as this was a space that we thought would have the most impact, turning grey to green and increasing biodiversity on our site," explains deputy head, Louise Shepherd. The result was the creation of a community vegetable garden.

Today, Shenley Fields' garden includes 21 different types of fruit and vegetables. Families are encouraged to pick produce at collection time, strengthening community links and making the end of the day calmer and more sociable. A bright flower bed at the front of the setting now attracts pollinators and creates a welcoming entrance for children and staff. Children are involved daily in planting, watering, weeding and observing change, embedding learning through real, meaningful experiences.

WHY NATURE MATTERS IN THE EARLY YEARS

The Nature Park recognises that early childhood is a crucial time for developing attitudes to the natural world. Time outdoors supports mental health and wellbeing, helping children regulate emotions, build confidence and develop resilience. Sensory experiences such as muddy hands, growing shoots, and wriggling worms provide learning that is memorable and motivating.

Hands-on nature activities also build curiosity and agency. Even toddlers can collect leaves, water plants or notice insects, helping them feel capable and involved. Over time, these experiences lay foundations for environmental understanding, showing children that living things need care and that small actions can make a big difference.

For Shenley Fields, the journey is ongoing. The nursery team hope to use more of what they grow for snacks and cooking activities, and to continue building staff confidence in outdoor learning, gradually blurring the boundary between indoors and outdoors. Their experience shows that nurturing nature in the early years doesn't require perfection or vast space, just curiosity, commitment and the confidence to start small.

You can register to join the thousands of others taking part in the National Education Nature Park at educationnaturepark.org.uk. Read more about Shenley Fields' experience at tinyurl.com/TEYshnf



Home of educational play



Enjoy a moment of calm

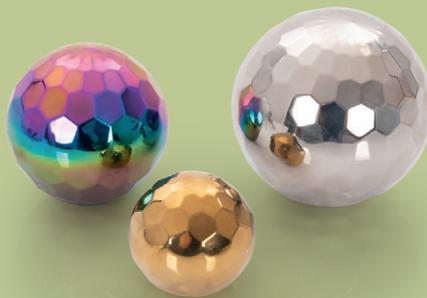
Sensory Dual Rainbow Cascade

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Make time for mindfulness

Jude Harries suggests simple ways to help children slow down, relax and reflect...

Breathing breaks

BLOWING BUBBLES

Encouraging children to notice their breathing is a good way to help them slow down and feel calm. Ask them to stop what they're doing and listen to their breathing (they can be sitting down or standing up). Ask them to place one hand on their tummy and count "one, two, three" as they breathe in. Can they feel their tummy growing like a bubble? Wait... and then breathe out slowly, counting to four, as though blowing soap bubbles. Can they blow a bigger bubble by breathing in and out more air?



SOFT TOY SHUFFLE

Gather the children together on the carpet with a soft toy or teddy. Ask them to lie down and place the toy on their tummy. Invite them to breathe in slowly, then breathe out and watch as the toy moves up and down. The children will



take deeper breaths to make the toys move more, and as their breathing deepens, they'll feel calmer. Try this gentle chant as they breathe: *Breathe in, move up / Breathe out, move down / Teddy's resting on my belly / Teddy's wobbling like a jelly.*

CALMING CANDLES

Invite the children to sit and make themselves comfortable. Can they imagine they're holding a favourite cupcake? Breathe in as they smell the cake. Then imagine there are two candles on the cake. Can they exhale and blow them out? They can use their fingers as candles and blow them out in turn. Now, light a real candle, and invite children to watch it. Talk about how the flame flickers. What happens if they breathe out near the candle? Invite a child to blow out the candle and watch the smoke curl away.



Thinking thoughts

SMILEY CIRCLE

Begin or end the day with a smiley circle game. Invite the children to sit in a circle and point out some smiley faces. Smiling is usually quite contagious, so see if you can spread it around the circle! Ask one smiley child to pass their smile around the group by turning to their neighbour and smiling. If some children are shy and reluctant to smile, provide a toy with a smiley face or a printed-out emoji for them to use. Can the children think of some things that make them smile to share with the circle (favourite food or toy, seeing mummy at the end of the day, a funny joke)?

MUSICAL MINDS

Listening to music is a good way to create a calm atmosphere in a setting. Gentle instrumental pieces such as the piano solo "Clair de lune" by Claude Debussy, "Spiegel im Spiegel" by Arvo Pärt, or Pachelbel's "Canon in D" are all good options. Alternatively, try more ambient tracks or nature sounds – there are lots to choose from on YouTube! Another way for children to use their musical minds is to provide a small keyboard and headphones for them to experiment with and create their own calm music.



BOOK BENEFITS

Books can help change the energy in a room. After a busy or energetic activity, guide children to the carpet or tables to select a book to look at. Use picture books, fiction and non-fiction, puzzle books, and notebooks, as well as drawing materials. Display a timer and encourage the children to focus on a book for three minutes. Some children might prefer to share a book with another child. Some might like to read to a friend or small group. Others might need one-to-one input from a member of staff, but they can all appreciate the benefits.





Mindful moves

FINGER GYM

Invite children to join in this finger “brain break”. Ask them to pretend to glue their thumbs together so they don’t move. Number the fingers 1–4, starting with the index finger (1) and ending with the little finger (4). Touch the fingertips together as you count to four. Start slowly and gradually get faster. Try calling out different sequences of numbers for the children to follow: 4, 3, 2, 1 or 2, 4, 2, 4.

YOUNG YOGA

Try these simple yoga poses with the children. Start by sitting with legs crossed, hands resting on knees, and index fingers and thumbs touching. Close your eyes and breathe. Make a downward dog pose. Start on all fours, tucking the toes under, and pushing the bottom into the air like an upside-down “V”. Breathe and try a few quiet barks! Finish with the child pose. Start on all fours, rest the bottom back onto the feet and stretch arms in front, head resting on the floor.

SLEEPING BUNNIES

Another favourite for calming down children after a busy PE session or game is Sleeping bunnies.

Invite them to lie on the floor in a sleeping position as you sing:
See the little bunnies, sleeping 'til it's noon / Shall we wake them with a merry tune? / They're so still, are they ill? / No... Wake up, bunnies! / Hop, little bunnies, hop, hop, hop / Hop, hop, hop / Hop, hop, hop / Hop, little bunnies, hop, hop, hop / Hop and STOP!

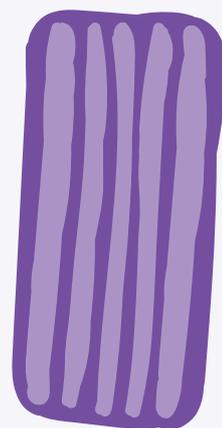


TIP:
It's important to help the adults in your setting keep calm too; invite all staff to follow the S.T.O.P. technique described below and join in the calming activities with the children.

Calming crafts

DOUGH-DREAMS

This activity works particularly well with a small group of children around a table. Provide each child with a small piece of playdough to hold in one hand. Encourage them to look closely at the dough, to see its colour, shape, size and weight. Invite children to move the dough between their hands, squishing it, stretching it, rolling it, and watching it change. Some children might choose to turn it into something and want to share their dreams; others might not make anything specific but still enjoy the experience.



CALM CORNER

Set up a designated space in your setting for children to take “time out” if they need to calm down. Provide a comfortable seat, cushions and blankets, picture books and some mindful props such as a basket of pebbles or shells, leaves and feathers, fidget toys, and soft toys. Show children how to use the calm corner effectively. Emphasise keeping it tidy and trying to use quiet voices. Invite the children to feed back and suggest changes.



GLITTER JARS

These are sometimes called “calm-down bottles” and are easy-to-make jars or bottles full of coloured water, small amounts of glue and, of course, lots of glitter. Before shaking them, observe the glitter sitting separately at the bottom, settled, calm and still. Feeling angry or upset can be mirrored by the glitter as it swirls about like jumbled thoughts when the jar is shaken. For children, just watching the slow-motion movement of the glitter as it settles back down again can be calming.

KEEPING CALM

Supporting anxious children, including helping them to self-regulate and keep calm, seems to be a bigger part of early years teaching today than ever before. Basic deep-breathing exercises are a good place to start, and the other activities in this article will help you take it further and hopefully create a calmer learning environment for you and those in your care. You may also find it useful to employ the mindfulness technique S.T.O.P., developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn. S.T.O.P. is an acronym for these four essential steps: **S**top – **T**ake a breath – **O**bserve – **P**roceed mindfully.



Jude Harries is an author and teacher of music and drama, with experience of working with children aged nine months to 11 years.



NILGÜN ERŞINCAN IS AN EARLY YEARS TEACHER

Inside early years in Türkiye

*Nilgün Erşincan shares a reflective comparison
of Turkish and UK practice...*

Early years education shares universal goals, such as supporting children's holistic development, and helping them become confident, socially connected and unique individuals. At the same time, cultural factors, practical approaches and perspectives on family involvement can create notable differences. Here, I want to highlight three differences I've observed in early years practices between Türkiye and the UK, and focus on their impact on children.

I Family involvement

In Türkiye, class sizes are generally larger in public preschools and smaller in private settings. Unlike the UK ratio system, public preschools in Türkiye usually have one teacher responsible for the class's core education, while private ones may have additional teachers, depending on their approach and capacity. Teachers maintain frequent interactions with parents. Face-to-face meetings occur regularly, alongside daily or weekly feedback. Digital communication tools, such as parent/teacher WhatsApp groups, are also widely used, supporting informal contact between families and teachers. This frequent communication allows teachers in Türkiye to develop a deeper understanding of children's family contexts, strengthening emotional bonds between teachers, children, and parents.

Family involvement also impacts classroom activities and flow. For instance, some classrooms in public preschools have a "class parent" role, where a parent shares responsibility for organising events, supporting the teacher in family involvement activities, and contributing to the learning in the setting. In the UK, teacher-child relationships are structured through the key person system, with fewer children per



teacher compared to Türkiye. Here, teachers establish secure attachments with children while maintaining clear professional boundaries with parents. Communication is more often provided through daily reports, posts, and monthly observations, as well as face-to-face meetings.

These different approaches affect children's social and emotional development. In Türkiye, children see their teacher as a secure adult and view the preschool as an extension of their home environment. This can contribute to emotional security and support a sense of belonging. In contrast, children in the UK experience relationships with multiple adults while also forming a strong bond with their key person. This connection can help them develop secure relationships with different adults and enhances their understanding of boundaries and independence.

2 Activity practices

In Türkiye, early years activities are generally planned as individual, small-group or whole-group experiences. While one-to-one activities may be used, daily practice often places

greater emphasis on bringing children together to learn. This might involve whole-group activities with a shared learning focus and small-group experiences tailored to children's interests or developmental stages. Within daily routines, whole-group activities are frequently observed in Turkish early years settings. These may take the form of a single planned activity or, more commonly, integrated activities, supporting multiple areas of development within one learning process. For example, in an activity such as "Find the fruit and match its colour", children close their eyes to explore and identify fruits, then place them into the matching colour basket. Through this process, sensory exploration and early mathematical thinking are supported simultaneously, creating an integrated science and maths experience.

Based on my professional experience in the UK, activity practices tend to be more focused on small-group and individualised learning. Early years education in England is guided by the EYFS framework, which promotes open-ended, exploration-based learning environments. Classrooms are

often organised with carefully planned areas that invite children to explore independently, while practitioners adopt a facilitative role. Practitioners observe children closely there, extend learning through thoughtful interactions, and provide support that responds to individual needs. Key persons frequently plan one-to-one or small-group activities to support their children's learning and development. While both Turkish and UK practices prioritise child-centred, sensory-rich experiences, differences can be observed in how activities are planned, structured, and implemented. In the UK, activities are often shaped fluidly in response to children's interests in the moment, whereas in Türkiye, flexibility is more commonly embedded within planned activity frameworks, such as integrated activities.

These differing approaches may positively impact children's development in different ways. In Türkiye, group-based learning experiences can promote social skills and collaboration, while also fostering listening skills and a sense of belonging. In contrast, the individualised approach commonly seen in UK settings may support children's independence, decision-making skills and growing sense of responsibility for their own learning.

3 Approaches to independence

Türkiye and the UK adopt different approaches to supporting children in becoming unique, independent individuals. These are reflected in classroom routines, teacher-child interactions and learning processes. Turkish settings tend to emphasise group-based learning, while practice in the UK often prioritises early independence and individual learning.

In Türkiye, early years education

aims to develop children as active learners, with teachers taking a guiding role throughout the day. In art, music, drama or other activities, teachers provide step-by-step support while allowing children to make their own choices and solve problems together. For example, in a bridge-building

In Türkiye, daily routines are more often approached collectively

activity, teachers might introduce different bridges and discuss features they have seen with children. Parents may be involved to extend learning by observing bridges with their children. Children then draw and discuss imagined bridges before building them with materials. During the building stage, the teacher encourages children to share their methods, observe the cause and effect relationships and help each other. This process may support social interaction, courage and self-confidence.

Daily routines are also largely group-focused, including morning circle, group play and tidying up the classroom together. This approach may encourage children to exchange ideas, learn from each other and collaborate within the group.

In the UK, adults generally take on a facilitative role, encouraging children to try things independently and learn through experience. While some routines are shared as a group, there is a strong emphasis on supporting children to manage everyday tasks

for themselves. Children are often given space to attempt self-care routines independently, with practitioners stepping in when needed rather than leading from the outset. For example, children may be encouraged to clear their own plates after meals

or take increasing responsibility during toileting routines, such as attempting to manage clothing or emptying a potty with support. Practitioners view these moments as opportunities for learning, confidence-building and decision-making, rather than tasks to be completed quickly or perfectly.

In Türkiye, daily routines are more often approached collectively and supported closely by adults. Shared responsibility and adult presence play a central role in helping children feel secure and cared for. Within this approach, independence is supported, but it is often developed through guided participation. For instance, routines such as tidying up or aspects of self-care may be introduced with more adult involvement, allowing children to build confidence gradually within a supportive framework.

THREE THINGS TO TRY IN THE UK

Family relationships

Enhance your engagement with parents by fostering more frequent communications. For example, organise regular activities that encourage joint participation of parents and practitioners, or maintain interaction through a managed messaging group.

Whole-group learning

Incorporate planned whole-group and integrated activities that allow children to explore several areas of learning simultaneously. This approach can help support collaboration and peer learning, and strengthen children's sense of belonging in the group.

Collaborative activities

Implement group routines and collaborative activities in the classroom that encourage children to work together and support one another. These moments can help develop children's social skills and build confidence within the group context.



Meet our winners!

If you missed the announcement of the *Teach Early Years Awards 2025*, fear not – here are the tools, resources and books that came top in each of the six categories...

COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Ready Steady Write EYFS

Ready Steady Write from Literacy Counts is an evidence-based primary writing scheme for EYFS-KS2. Built around high-quality, language-rich literature, it provides a structured and sequenced approach that develops confident, independent writers across all year groups. Writing units are carefully mapped to the national curriculum to ensure consistent progression from early years through to Y6. It's designed to meet the needs of all learners – including EAL, SEND and the lowest 20% – through adaptive teaching and a clear writing journey.

Visit literacycounts.co.uk

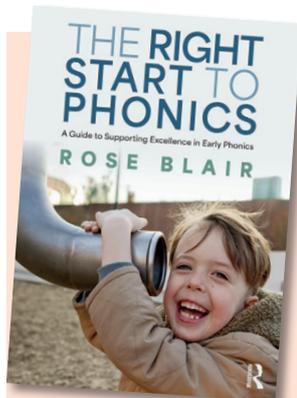


CPD

The Right Start to Phonics – A Guide to Supporting Excellence in Early Phonics

This book from The Right Start Early Years Consultancy is full of playful, active and fun ideas to help young children develop the auditory skills they need to access the phonic code. It will show you how to support children in gaining the skills they need to listen with accuracy and differentiate between, manipulate and understand the sounds they hear. Drawing on the latest research, it explains how to embed early phonics across your provision in a way that fits into your daily routine. Author Rose Blair has experience as an early years teacher, Specialist Leader in Education and early years adviser.

Visit therightstartearlyyears.co.uk



CREATIVE PLAY

Boromi Play Library

Boromi's innovative school- and nursery-based resource is designed to build an infrastructure of play support around a family right from birth through to primary school. Each termly Play Library provides a curated collection of play bags, free for families to borrow, take home and explore together. Every bag is expertly curated to support early communication and language through play, including high-quality resources, a linked book and accessible family guidance. The programme is evidence-based and designed and run by early years play experts.

Visit boromi.co.uk





HAPPY & HEALTHY

tickit Whizz Balance Bike

The Whizz Balance Bike is the perfect way to help little ones build confidence and balance from an early age. Designed for children aged 24 months to five years, it features a durable, rustproof plastic frame that stands up to all the outdoor adventures and indoor fun children can handle. The puncture-proof tyres ensure a smooth and safe ride on a variety of surfaces, while the adjustable seat (33-43cm) grows with children as they develop their riding skills. The built-in footrest adds an extra level of comfort and stability, making it easier for toddlers and preschoolers to enjoy their ride.

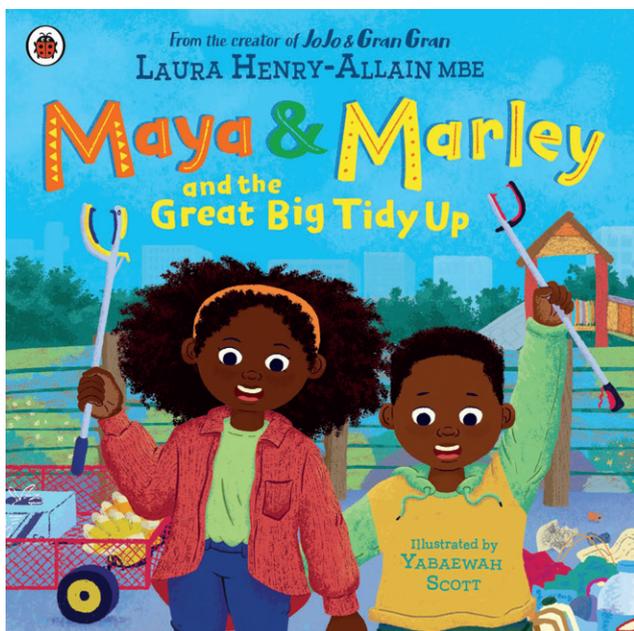
Visit tickit.co.uk

EARLY EXPLORATION

Ten in the Bed

Packed full of mathematical learning potential, this versatile, double-sided number line from Yellow Door is perfect for developing a secure understanding of numbers one to 10. It has one long base slot, encouraging children to estimate spatially to order the bears. Children will enjoy playfully learning as they match the bears' numerals to the dot patterns on the duvet. By using the unmarked sides and the delightful details on the bears, children can explore number bonds and spot and create repeating patterns using the bears' arm positions, fur and pyjama colours, and nose and ear shapes. This resource is made from FSC-certified beech and pine.

Visit yellow-door.net



PICTURE BOOKS

Maya and Marley and the Great Big Tidy Up

Maya and Marley live in their very own playground with Mum, Dad and pet goats Lou and Chou. But when the playground becomes overrun with litter, it's up to Maya and Marley to plan a tidy-up. Will they be able to clear it all away by themselves? This warm, adventurous book promotes empathy and caring for the world around you. Its author, Laura Henry-Allain MBE, is the creator of CBeebies' well-loved *JoJo and Gran Gran* characters and is the series' associate producer.

Visit penguin.co.uk



Protectors of play

*The rise of EYFS formalisation is putting holistic, child-centred learning at risk – here’s how practitioners can push back, says **Emily Hanson**...*

I’ll never forget the joy of setting up my first EYFS classroom. I was a fresh, shiny, enthusiastic NQT, deeply passionate about learning through play in the early years. I will also never forget the Sisyphean efforts of sustaining and protecting continuous provision as my first year went on. My PGCE, while training me across primary, had specialised in the EYFS. Cambridge deeply embedded a fierce determination for the early years cohort to put play at the focus of our work. We were warned that once we entered the schooling system formally, we’d likely be up against it to protect the incredible value of play within primary settings. I felt that deeply, nearly a decade ago. I now see it happening with my own children – and I’m determined to continue safeguarding play.

In all areas of learning, play should not be an added extra for when the “proper” stuff is complete. Early years practitioners know this in their bones. Development Matters has play at the heart of all learning. It is the medium within which true, deep learning and joy occurs. Nurseries are assessed against this, PGCEs and nursery practitioner courses nurture it. But why, in that final year of the EYFS, when children enter school, is it so frequently seen as less than?

I would argue this owes to a deep disconnect between the EYFS curriculum and the national curriculum. The EYFS embeds pedagogy. It oozes a child-centred, holistic approach. The national curriculum, while broad, varied, and (thankfully, owing to the 2025 review) more representative of the world we live in than ever, does not always have a holistic reflection on a child’s development. It, too frequently, is read as a to-do list, a collection of planned knowledge. Often, based upon high targets, high pressure, and low budgets, schools’ use of the national curriculum is summative of



Yeats’ “filling of a bucket” instead of the “lighting of a fire”. And that bucket-filling, sadly, often seeps across (not down) to the EYFS. Year 1 phonics screenings, SATS tests and overall assessments often lead to a “push down” approach, where, as opposed to the beautiful pedagogy of Development Matters being taken up by older year groups, the more rigid methodologies of the national curriculum are placed upon younger children. So, what does this look like in practice?

PHONICS AND FORMALISATION

Creeping formalisation is easy to spot. Had I more words to play with, I could produce a long list of the places it appears – but I argue it’s found most in one of our most assessed areas of learning in the UK: phonics. Following the UK government’s 2021/22 round of systematic synthetic phonics scheme approvals, schools are now expected to select from a predetermined list of phonics schemes. This isn’t inherently a negative thing – reading and writing being vital, mind-opening and life-

Play should not be an added extra

changing skills to have (reading, in fact, is my favourite thing to do!). I do feel, however, that many of these schemes do not differentiate learning for the EYFS.

A popular phonics scheme, for example, has EYFS children carrying out adult-initiated work for nearly an hour a day, post-Christmas. Children are expected to sit at desks, and continuously read and write set decodable texts with interspersed adult guidance. I taught such a scheme; my daughter uses such a scheme. It's effective, certainly – but it is not developmentally appropriate. Gone, often, are the playful characters taught around letter sounds. Gone, frequently, are the stories, the nursery rhymes – the freedom to teach phonics and reading around the interests of the cohort. Teachers may attempt further story and literacy teaching later in the day to make up for the restrictive nature of such schemes, but this pulls further from the free play children deeply need. Reading is seen as a pure, stratified skill to teach, and is so often divorced from the true joy of playful,

exploratory storytelling.

Similar schemes are on the rise for other “core” subjects. From maths to PE, structures are often not an option, with almost minute-by-minute plans telling practitioners and teachers exactly how to deliver learning, with no freedom to follow the interests or choices of the learners. Buckets, indeed. And what do we lose when these precious hours are scripted and controlled? Play, freedom, choice.

How then can practitioners push back in primary schools? I have a few recommendations up my sleeve that you can use today.

1 Prioritise continuous provision
Continuous provision should always be at the heart of your teaching. You may find set lesson plan structures, expectations for all classrooms, and an assumption that learning happens in adult-guided time. Wherever you can, embed your teaching in high-quality, open-ended play opportunities. Do what you can to set up a continuous provision-friendly environment, and capture regular evidence of learning outcomes growing through playful, child-initiated activity. Proof is in the pudding, after all.

2 Share with older age groups
Often, Key Stage 1 teachers will know, deeply, the need for play in older

groups. The more teachers you can immerse in early years pedagogy, the more important continuous provision will be viewed as in your school. So, share your resources wherever you can. Engage in conversations; offer slots in your outdoor area, if possible, for Year 1 and 2 learners. If teachers are particularly interested, you might even share with them some approaches to facilitating your pedagogy in older classrooms. I particularly love the Cool Curriculum (coolcurriculum.co.uk), a framework enabling Key Stage 1 practitioners to adopt EYFS pedagogy.

3 Champion play
Many incredible teachers have not held an EYFS teaching position. The role often confuses those who have been trained on the pedagogy of the national curriculum. Teachers of older age groups are relying on you to explain how your pedagogy (sadly) contrasts deeply with the national curriculum, and why it must be protected. If something being discussed as a whole-school initiative doesn't seem right to you, speak up and explain why. Even better, offer ways that playful learning and continuous provision could be adopted in older age groups.

4 Connect with others
The freedom you have to promote play will vary from school to school. The more formal a school, the harder the push will be, but I advocate for surrounding yourself with equally passionate folk. I hugely admire the work of practitioners like Ruth Lee-Que (My Mummy Teacher) and her campaign, Play is Learning (tinyurl.com/TEYplil – she provides templates and petitions to promote early years into KS1). Game Changers Collective (tinyurl.com/TEYgchc) is another fantastic group advocating for progressive, age-appropriate pedagogy in the UK.

TAKE A STAND

Early years practitioners are unique folk. We adore play and freedom, and the true magic of learning. My wish is that one day, our pedagogies will be spread beyond age five. For now, though, we must safeguard what we have. I hope this inspires you to remain the fierce protectors of play!





HOLLY BOWMAN IS AN EARLY YEARS SPECIALIST

Lessons for leaders

*Keeping children at the heart of education is an ongoing challenge – here’s what those shaping settings’ practice must remember, says **Holly Bowman**...*

In today’s education landscape, leaders are navigating unprecedented levels of pressure. Accountability measures, policy shifts, inspection frameworks and funding constraints create a constant hum of external noise. Amid this, one vital question remains: are children still at the heart of what we do?

I recently carried out my early years master’s dissertation with Pen Green Research Base, exploring the lived experiences of teachers, leaders and children in early years and Key Stage 1 in school. The research offered both reassurance and a warning. It showed that while value-led leadership can protect child-centred practice, the system itself often pulls schools away from what children need most: time, relationships, autonomy and meaningful learning. Child-centred practice values children beyond data and test scores; it develops them holistically and does not compartmentalise social and emotional learning from cognitive abilities.

This article distils the key messages gained from my research that leaders need to hold on to if they are to safeguard children’s wellbeing, learning and joy, while also supporting staff and themselves.

1 Values are not optional

One of the strongest findings from the research is the power of value-driven leadership. In the case study school, leaders were deeply committed to inclusion, care and breaking cycles of disadvantage. These values were not simply written into policies; they were lived daily through relationships, language and decisions.

Children experienced warmth,

familiarity and genuine connection. Leaders knew children by name, remembered their lives beyond school and modelled attentiveness that no data dashboard could ever capture. This kind of leadership sends a clear message: children matter as people, not just as outcomes.

However, values were also under strain. Leaders spoke openly about compromise; the tension between what they believe is right for children and what the system demands. This is the reality many leaders recognise. The key difference here was that values acted as an anchor. When leaders are clear on why they do, they are better placed to make principled decisions, even within constraints.

Leadership lesson: *Values must be explicit, shared and protected. When external pressure increases, values should become louder, not quieter.*

2 External pressure trickles down
Accountability doesn’t stop at the leader’s door. The research highlights

how pressure filters through the system: from policy decisions to leadership, from leadership to teachers, and ultimately into classrooms and onto children. Teachers described feeling constantly “compromised”, “juggling” and fearful of “not being good enough”. Many worked long hours, sacrificed family time and carried a deep sense of responsibility for children’s outcomes. While their commitment was extraordinary, it came at a cost.

When adults feel anxious, uncertain or emotionally depleted, this inevitably affects children. Learning becomes rushed. The curriculum narrows. Time to listen, observe and respond shrinks. Children may comply, but they do not always thrive. Leaders play a critical role in interrupting this cycle. While they cannot remove all external demands, they can act as



filters, deciding what truly matters and what can be softened, delayed or challenged.

Leadership lesson: *Protecting children means protecting teachers from unnecessary pressure. Emotional health is foundational to quality practice.*

“When external pressure increases, values should become louder, not quieter”

3 The curriculum must serve children

A recurring concern in the research was the narrowing of the curriculum. Increased emphasis on phonics, maths, writing and testing has reduced time for creative, physical and exploratory learning. Leaders and teachers alike recognised that while attainment data captures what children can do, it rarely shows who they are or how far they have come.

Children’s passions, interests and cultural identities were often squeezed out by rigid schemes and fast-paced timetables. Leaders described having their “hands tied”, despite knowing that children learn best when they are engaged, curious and emotionally invested.

The research reinforces a long-standing truth from early years pedagogy: play, creativity and deep engagement are not in opposition to learning; they are how learning happens. When children have opportunities to collaborate, explore and lead their learning, they show stronger dispositions such as persistence, confidence and intrinsic motivation.

Leadership lesson: *Curriculum coherence matters, but flexibility matters more. Leaders must champion pedagogy that honours how children learn, not just what they are expected to achieve.*

4 Teacher agency is essential

Teachers in the study valued the autonomy they were given, but with limits. While leaders encouraged adaptation and creativity, fixed

outcomes and accountability measures still framed what was possible. This partial agency left teachers grateful, but conflicted.

Research consistently showed that teacher agency (the ability to make informed professional decisions) is closely linked to job satisfaction, wellbeing and effectiveness. When teachers feel trusted, they are more likely to take thoughtful risks, respond to children’s needs and sustain their commitment to the profession. Without agency, teaching becomes performative. With it, teaching becomes relational, responsive and deeply human.

Leadership lesson: *Trust is an act of leadership. When teachers are trusted as professionals, children benefit directly.*

5 Relationships matter

Perhaps the most powerful message from the research is this: relationships are the true infrastructure of education.

Strong relationships between leaders and staff created a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Positive adult-child relationships supported children’s confidence, engagement and wellbeing. Where relationships were prioritised, the school felt calm, connected, even under pressure. Yet relationships need time and emotional space to flourish. When schedules are overloaded and accountability dominates conversations, relational work becomes invisible and undervalued.

Leaders must actively create conditions where reflection, relational supervision and emotional containment are possible. Without this, self-sacrifice becomes normalised, burnout becomes invisible, and children lose access to emotionally available adults.

Leadership lesson: *Relationships require intentional investment.*

A FINAL REFLECTION

Keeping children at the heart of education is not about resisting accountability altogether. It is about rebalancing the system so that data, policy and inspection serve children, not replace them. Leaders cannot do this alone; however, through value-led decision-making, relational leadership and courageous advocacy, they can

create spaces where children are seen, heard and valued.

In a complex system, the most radical act of leadership may simply be this: to keep asking, what does this mean for the child in front of us?

An ex-maintained nursery school headteacher, Holly has extensive experience in the early years sector in a career spanning 30 years. Currently, she leads Initial Teacher Education at Pen Green Research Base, delivering both the 3–7 and 5–11 PGCE with QTS. To find out more, visit pengreen.org

Managing the noise

FIVE TIPS FOR LEADERS...

Be the filter, not the amplifier

Not every external demand needs to land in classrooms. Decide what genuinely serves children and what can be adapted, delayed or challenged.

Name and protect your values

Revisit your school’s moral purpose regularly. Use values as a lens for decision-making, not just a statement on the wall.

Create space for professional trust

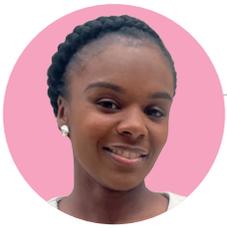
Give teachers permission to adapt, slow down and respond to children. Trust their expertise and practise wisdom.

Safeguard time for relationships and reflection

Build in opportunities for reflective supervision, dialogue and emotional processing. Well-supported adults support children better.

Champion a broad, joyful curriculum

Defend play, creativity and enrichment. These are not extras; they are essential to children’s learning and wellbeing.



DR LEANNE JAYE ADEYEMI IS AN EDUCATION CONSULTANT

“Settings must be movement-rich”

*Early years practitioners have a key role to play in building the gross motor skills vital for good health, says **Dr Leanne Jaye Adeyemi**...*

Being able to move efficiently – and to move more – brings benefits all of us, as adults, can recognise in everyday life. We notice it in the ease of walking up the stairs without feeling out of breath, for example, or in keeping up with the children as they run around our settings. However, these benefits didn’t appear by chance. They are shaped by multiple factors – including the communities we are immersed in, the organisations we engage with and the significant people around us – and are hugely influenced by our experiences in the early years.

While the window of opportunity for development is at its prime in our early years, laying the foundations for health and many developmental areas, the current picture is concerning. For many children, the landscape in relation to movement and health is not what we would hope for, and present trends suggest a worrying trajectory. The Youth Sport Trust anticipates that by 2035 more than one-third of children will fail to be active for even 30 minutes a day. Among the least active children, attendance, engagement and feelings of belonging are also expected to decline. Obesity rates are predicted to rise to 24% among 10–11-year-olds, while diagnoses of Type 2 diabetes in children are expected to double year on year.

However, trajectories can be changed, and early years practitioners are ideally placed to help make that difference. Increased physical activity engagement levels, lower obesity rates, and improvements in wider health-related fitness factors,

social development and even future handwriting proficiency have all been linked to children with well-developed foundational gross motor skills. These skills allow them to engage in physical activity effectively and confidently.

Referred to as fundamental movement skills (FMS), they offer insight into a child’s strength, coordination and stability, and are grouped into the following three categories:

- **Locomotor skills:** These help us move from one place to another (e.g. running, jumping, skipping).
- **Object control skills:** These help us move objects such as a ball (e.g. throwing, catching and kicking).
- **Stability skills:** These help us stay balanced when standing still and as we move (e.g. balancing, twisting and landing).

Many children across the UK lack the ability to carry out these movements efficiently and to use them effectively when being physically active. While there are known factors that influence disparities in development – such as whether a child lives in an affluent or deprived area, gender and ethnicity – the current landscape of FMS development shows that many children from all backgrounds are not meeting



expected age-related milestones.

Fundamental movement skills emerge in the early years and are expected to be “mastered” during late childhood. By “mastered”, we mean that children can competently demonstrate them, making childhood a critical period for development. As children journey through their developmental pathway of FMS, it is important to recognise that these skills are not acquired automatically. To develop as effectively as possible, children need to be taught these skills and given regular opportunities to practise them, with the support of feedback and encouragement.

While the factors shaping children’s health trajectories are complex and multifaceted, there is cause for optimism – in part through strengthening FMS development. The earlier we can strengthen the foundations of these skills, the greater the opportunity to move children away from expected negative trajectories and towards more positive outcomes.

Early support for FMS development starts with recognising the uniqueness

of each child holistically, from physical features such as strength, to individual needs and preferences. While there may be opportunities to intervene at scale, with a full cohort, it’s important to use activities that can be easily adapted where needed. Engagement is best supported through activities and resources that are appropriate to a child’s developmental stage, allowing them to experience both success and challenge along the way, which in turn encourages progress.

Creating an enabling, movement-rich environment is key. Children should be able to move freely around the space in different ways, giving room for them to practise their skills, with encouragement

to stay active. Just as we create language-rich environments to support communication, movement development benefits from the same approach.

DEVELOPMENT IN YOUR SETTING

The impact of interventions to improve FMS is well evidenced. As these skills do not develop naturally, there has to be active intention around their progression, with practitioners playing a key role in creating meaningful movement opportunities for children. It is important to remember, too, that this doesn’t have to be framed as “sports”. As a practitioner, you bring valuable insight into the unique contexts of the children you work with. You understand their interests – whether animals, blocks, or trains – and can use these as a starting point for creating engaging, themed movement activities.

It’s important to use activities that can be easily adapted

For example, if you notice a strong interest in lions during free play, this can be adapted into a movement activity by encouraging children to “move like lions” around the outdoor space, practising stopping, starting, balancing, and changing direction. This simple adjustment can increase engagement and allow children to develop key movement skills in a playful and familiar context.

Your understanding of the daily routine in your setting will also help you identify natural opportunities to integrate movement. The timetable should allow you to plan and adapt sessions to include more physical activity, even during times focused on early phonics or number development – for instance, through incorporating jumping, balancing or travelling movements while counting or identifying letter sounds. Further ideas can be found in my free FMS activity pack, complete with links to the different areas of learning (you’ll find the details below).

Knowledge of children’s developmental stages is essential when shaping appropriate activities,

informing levels of challenge, and determining how much variation is needed. Alongside this, an awareness of individual needs will help practitioners make decisions about the most suitable timing, type, and location of activities, as well as any additional support required to ensure all children can participate successfully.

Another vital factor is you. Your own engagement in physical activity, along with your experience and training in FMS, plays a crucial role in effective delivery. From integrating FMS across other areas of learning to strategically designing environments that encourage movement and FMS-based play, your influence can make a lasting difference.

The early years represent a critical window for development, with movement forming a fundamental part of that growth. While it can sometimes feel as though these skills have to be developed in isolation, they do not. By integrating them into the everyday rhythms of our setting, utilising play opportunities and practising the skills alongside other areas of learning, it’s possible to support children’s development in a holistic way.

Dr Leanne Jaye is the founder and CEO of Dr Leanne Jaye Consulting. To access a free FMS activity pack and a guide explaining how skills can be adapted to suit every child, visit drleannejaye.com/resourcehub

FIVE WAYS TO DEVELOP FMS IN YOUR SETTINGS

- Don’t think sport – think movement.
- Integrate movement across other areas of learning.
- Build movement into the structure of the day intentionally.
- Where possible, use children’s interests to frame activities.
- Create a movement-rich environment that encourages children to move freely.



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PHIL ARMSTRONG IS SENIOR EDUCATION LEAD AT EARLY EXCELLENCE

Boost fine motor skills outdoors

Phil Armstrong explains how sensory-rich learning opportunities in the fresh air foster children's physical development...

Fine motor development is often associated with indoor activities, yet many of the essential foundations are created outdoors. For children aged two to seven, outdoor continuous provision offers rich opportunities for strengthening hands, wrists and shoulders, while supporting the progression from broad exploratory movement to more refined tool control. With thoughtful planning, outdoor environments can provide a rich pathway for physical development across both EYFS and KS1.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

Fine motor control relies on strength and stability as well as precision, and outdoor play naturally promotes these. Activities such as lifting, climbing, hauling, digging and pulling help build the shoulder girdle and core muscles. These underpin grip control and handwriting fluency. When children practise these movements repeatedly in meaningful contexts, they develop the physical readiness needed for fine motor accuracy.

The sensory richness of outdoor learning makes it ideal for embedding fine motor skills in inspiring ways that complement, rather than mirror, learning opportunities indoors. Here are some suggestions to consider.

Mark making

Broad movement to greater control...

2 to 3: Young children benefit from large-scale mark making using chunky chalks, thick paintbrushes and rollers dipped in water. These experiences promote whole-arm movement and help children strengthen their shoulders and elbows.

4 to 5: Children begin to show improved control and dexterity. Provide smaller chalks and brushes, sticks for drawing in sand or soil, and clipboards for nature investigations and writing "on the go".

6 to 7: In KS1 continuous provision,

mark making outdoors can be used to greatly enrich learning across the curriculum. Include opportunities for map drawing, observational sketching and recording linked to outdoor investigation.

Nature investigation

Precision through real exploration...

2 to 3: Provide opportunities for handling natural materials. Scooping soil, filling pots or exploring collections of shells and stones encourages early grasp refinement.

4 to 5: Introduce tweezers, bug tongs, seed sorters and small jars. Sorting natural materials or collecting minibeasts prompts repeated pinching and placing movements that strengthen hands.

6 to 7: Older children can gather data, use hand lenses, compare specimens or sketch findings. These activities require a controlled grip, accurate placement and fine motor endurance.



Outdoor weaving

Developing coordination and dexterity...

2 to 3: Provide large weaving frames with netting or crates. Children can thread a range of materials, such as ribbons or long grasses. These broad movements help establish bilateral coordination.

4 to 5: Offer smaller frames with shorter materials, and pegs. Children must pinch, pull and thread with greater accuracy, strengthening their finger control.

6 to 7: Introduce more resistant

materials such as rope or flexible willow. Simple pattern weaving or knot work remains safe but requires refined, skilful manipulation.

Construction, ropes & pulleys

Linking strength and fine control...

2 to 3: Loose parts such as crates, blocks and tyres encourage lifting, arranging and balancing. These activities help build core stability and shoulder strength.

4 to 5: Add ropes, lighter planks, log slices and bungee cords. Children can explore knotting, threading and joining, which helps develop stronger hands and better coordination.

6 to 7: Introduce small pulley systems, simple hoists or den-building kits. These experiences require knot tying, directional pulling and precise placement of materials.

PLANNING PROGRESSION

To support fine motor development across ages, try the following:

- Increasing resistance or material challenge over time
- Moving from large-scale exploration to smaller, purposeful tasks
- Introducing finer tools gradually as children show readiness
- Ensuring ongoing access to climbing, digging and transporting to maintain proximal strength
- Embedding authentic contexts, such as surveying, building, recording or designing, to motivate precision

Outdoor continuous provision offers unique opportunities for developing fine motor skills because it naturally blends strength building with practical tool use and real-world purpose.

Discover more about transforming your outdoor learning provision and practice and download free audit tools at earlyexcellence.com/outdoor-learning



HELEN BUTEUX IS AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST

“Tummy time doesn’t have to be a battle”

*Not all babies embrace it, but it’s crucial for physical development – so try a different approach, suggests **Helen Buteux**...*

When my daughter was a few weeks old, she made her opinion on tummy time very clear. The moment I placed her on her front, she let out a determined protest and made sure I knew she was unimpressed. As an occupational therapist (OT), I understood why it felt so overwhelming for her: she didn’t yet have the strength, the sensory familiarity or the confidence to enjoy being in this position.

But I also knew we could work with it. I used tiny, playful invitations instead of long stretches: a cosy incline across my chest, a soft towel supporting her under the arms, something visually interesting to look up towards, and sessions lasting seconds, not minutes. Slowly, she grew more comfortable. She never transformed into a baby who adored tummy time, but she tolerated it enough, and each small success supported her growing strength and confidence.

I’ve seen this pattern countless times in my clinical work, too. Many little ones resist tummy time at first, and practitioners and parents can assume “it’s too difficult”, “they don’t need tummy time”, “they get lots of interactions in other ways”, “we don’t have time”. But resistance rarely means inability; it usually means a different approach is needed.

A CRITICAL WINDOW

The first years of life are the most rapid period of brain growth we ever experience. Within the brain, neural

pathways are forming at extraordinary speed, shaped by movement, sensory exploration, relationships and environment.

I would argue that the early years is more important than any other educational stage, because it is here, long before school, that the foundations for curiosity, coordination, emotional regulation, communication and learning are laid. We simply never get this window back. Which is why the everyday experiences we offer babies matter so deeply.

Movement is not just physical; it also shapes cognitive, sensory and emotional development. And tummy time, when approached responsively and flexibly, is part of that foundation.

WHY TUMMY TIME MATTERS

Research shows that awake, supervised tummy time contributes to early motor skills such as:

- head control
- upper body strength
- early weight shifting
- preparation for rolling, sitting and crawling

More recent evidence shows that small, frequent moments of tummy time play can support stronger overall motor development.

Tummy time doesn’t have to mean one set position on a mat. It refers to any position where a baby’s tummy is



supported against a surface and they're working against gravity. If their tummy is down and they're lifting, pushing, or turning their head, it counts. Side-lying, gentle inclines, chest-to-chest time, and supported propping all offer the same strengthening and sensory benefits. These variations are often far more comfortable for babies who resist traditional tummy time.

UNDERSTANDING PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Ofsted's recent *Getting It Right From the Start* report (tinyurl.com/TEYgrfs) raised important points about the early years sector's understanding of physical development:

- 31% of practitioners believed physical development occurs without adult intervention, despite evidence showing adult-guided opportunities make a significant difference.
- Many respondents struggled to identify the small steps that lead to bigger milestones.
- 17% felt teaching was unnecessary for babies and toddlers, even though this is the most rapid period of brain growth.
- The sector needs more accessible, evidence-informed training, especially during recruitment and retention challenges.

For tummy time, this means understanding that the tiny moments matter, environments matter, and practitioner confidence matters.

AN OT'S ROLE

Across my work with babies, families and early years settings, my role has often been to help adults see what babies are trying to do, then adapt the environment or the task so the child can engage meaningfully. Sometimes that's meant:

- adjusting the angle of the floor space
- adding sensory motivation
- supporting a key person to recognise emerging motor cues
- helping a nursery adapt its routines so all babies get varied movement
- showing families how a small positional change can make tummy time far more comfortable
- setting up spaces that encourage natural rolling, reaching or pushing through play

I've seen small adjustments unlock huge progress

I've seen how small adjustments unlock huge progress. When the environment and task are adapted thoughtfully, babies can participate in activities they want and need to do, activities that strengthen their bodies, support regulation and build confidence. This is exactly where early years practitioners, alongside parents, truly shine.

RESPONSIVE FLOOR PLAY

Early years practitioners are already well equipped to support physical development because they:

- read babies' cues
- create sensory-rich spaces
- offer varied play opportunities
- follow children's interests
- adapt naturally to individual needs

Tummy time and prone play fit beautifully into this philosophy:

1 Think tiny, frequent moments

Just like with my daughter, seconds of comfortable engagement build more progress than long stretches of discomfort.

2 Use positions that reduce effort

Gentle inclines, side-lying and supported chest-to-chest positions help babies explore strength without frustration.

3 Celebrate micro-steps

A brief head lift, a tiny weight shift or a small moment of gaze upward all signal emerging skills.

4 Create environments that invite movement

Soft mats, interesting textures, simple props and open floor spaces naturally encourage exploration.

5 Communicate observations, not instructions

Sharing what you've noticed with families keeps communication supportive and feeling like a partnership.

BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS

Tummy time doesn't need to be a battle, and it certainly doesn't need to look one specific way. When early years practitioners understand why tummy time matters, and how adaptable it can be, they are better equipped to offer babies the rich, responsive movement experiences that build the foundations for future skills. Tiny, flexible moments of tummy time play strengthen the motor, sensory and regulatory systems children rely on to thrive. With informed practice, thoughtful environments and confidence in the small steps that lead to big milestones, every baby can develop the early building blocks they need for learning, movement and lifelong wellbeing.

Helen has over a decade of experience specialising in early development, sensory foundations, maternal wellbeing and evidence-informed practice for infants and toddlers. Get in touch at helenbuteuxot@gmail.com

HOW OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY CAN HELP

- **OTs can support staff with developmentally informed training.** This helps practitioners understand developmental norms, not just milestones, early motor sequences and the micro-skills that lead to big milestones.
- **OTs can explain sensory foundations.** We help practitioners recognise how sensory systems support movement, regulation and physical development, all of which support a child's future.
- **OTs help embed evidence-informed practice.** Not through intervention to babies, but through empowering the adults around them, making everyday practice more confident, enjoyable and developmentally aligned.



KAREN HART IS AN EARLY YEARS SPECIALIST, DRAMA TEACHER, AND WRITER

15 minutes of physical fun!

*Free, easy to organise, and accessible to all, The Daily Mile is the perfect way to get your children moving, explains **Karen Hart**...*

Originating in 2012, the Daily Mile initiative (thedailymile.co.uk) is going from strength to strength. The brainchild of Elaine Wyllie, a former headteacher from Scotland, the scheme involves school pupils and early years children, walking, jogging, running, etc., for 15 minutes on a daily basis, to improve their physical, social, emotional and mental health by embedding a culture of activity into their day, regardless of age or ability. It's simple and free, with no special training or equipment needed.

The Daily Mile is perfect for nurseries, as it's designed to be adapted to an individual child's pace – wheeling, toddling, wheelchair users – focusing on fun, inclusion and building healthy habits, not distance covered. The challenge supports the EYFS through physical development, plus PSED and communication and language skills.

GETTING STARTED

- Get children ready by introducing the idea of the Daily Mile. During circle time, talk about lots of different types of sport. How many can children think of?
- Talk about how they can take part in different kinds of physical activities, and how everyone has their favourite ways to get moving. Ask children to share their favourite PE games (running, playing football, dancing, the climbing frame, parachute play, etc.). Then explain that they will all be taking part in the Daily Mile, which will give them lots of ways to get extra fit and healthy.
- Ask children if they think an obstacle course, or walking round the playground while balancing a beanbag on their head, sounds like fun. Or maybe jumping in and out of hoops across the playground? Ask for their suggestions for fun activities that everyone could do.

- Discuss why children think it's important to include exercise and movement in their day. Talk about how we feel after exercise (e.g. having more energy, feeling wide awake and ready to go!).

The Thrive Childcare Group has found many benefits from taking part in the Daily Mile, including increased emotional wellbeing, confidence, resilience and self-regulation. Its settings follow their 15 minutes of activity with some cool-down yoga, after which children are engaged and ready for the rest of their day.

"We have been working with The Daily Mile for a number of years," explains Ursula Krystek-Walton, Thrive's head of early years. "We recently organised a relaunch on September 1st, and all of our forty-six sites across Scotland and North West England continue to participate each week. The children are encouraged to walk, run, jog, etc. for fifteen minutes in their nursery's outdoor space or a local park.

"Our children love it. They run, wheel, or walk outdoors with friends, moving at their own pace. The non-competitive nature means every child succeeds, and the social aspect helps relationships flourish. There's no equipment, no prep., and no changing into kit. Just fifteen minutes, at least three times a week, at a time that suits the nursery, and it works in almost any weather."

GET MOVING!

When planning physical development activities for early years, keeping things simple, fun and non-competitive is key, as is considering the individual child's level of ability and enthusiasm for physical play. Pushing toys in buggies



along a marked track will be just the right amount of challenge for some, while others will be up for something more ambitious, such as an assault course involving a climbing frame, crawl tunnels and balance beams.

The following activities are all suitable to use as part of the 15-minute Daily Mile challenge for early years.

MAGIC REMOTE CONTROL

Everyone has at least one old remote control they're not using any more, and this fun game is a really good use for it.

- Start by showing children how to make sure they have enough space around them to safely dance by spinning round in a circle with their arms out like an aeroplane. Next, play some lively music popular with your group for everyone to dance along to.
- Tell children you have brought along your magic remote control that will get everyone dancing in lots of crazy ways. When you press pause, everyone must freeze – make a big deal of pressing the button as you call out, "I'm pressing the button... now!"
- Press the button again to restart the action, but this time tell children they will all be dancing like wild tigers, stopping the action with the remote control again in the same way.
- Carry on the game by telling children to dance as lots of different creatures – monkeys, robots, jellyfish, penguins, etc., with an adult demonstrating each one, so children have some help getting started.

Early learning goal: *Move energetically, such as running, jumping, dancing, hopping, skipping and climbing.*

THE FLOOR IS MADE OF ICE

We changed the old favourite (the floor is made of lava) to ice, as this was a concept young children found easier to grasp.

- Start by arranging lots of safe areas for children to step on around your playing space, such as mats, floor cushions, beanbags, foam floor tiles, etc. When you shout, "The floor is ice!" everyone has to find something to stand on – or get their feet frozen! We have lots of screaming as children try to quickly get off the floor.
- We like to play this game to music, with children dancing around the playground, but you can play without music if that's easier for you. Either way, this is one of those really



5,618,711 children
have benefitted
from The Daily
Mile globally

simple games that quickly becomes a favourite, and which is great for developing strength, balance, coordination and spatial awareness.

Early learning goal: *Negotiate space and obstacles safely, with consideration for themselves and others.*

BABY SHARK

We play this game to the "Baby Shark" song, but for those who can't bear to hear it any longer, another perfect piece of music is "Aquarium" from *The Carnival of the Animals*, by Camille Saint-Saëns.

- To play the game you need two adults holding a long length of material (preferably something blue or greenish and silky) across your playing area.
- Children take turns to run through it, pretending to be sharks, mermaids/mermen, octopuses, jellyfish, sea

horses, etc., with adults swishing the material up and down to look like a big wave. A good game for practising early running skills and coordination while playing.

Early learning goal: *Demonstrate strength, balance and coordination when playing.*

BUBBLE POP

This activity works best if you have a bubble machine, but you can also blow the bubbles yourself.

- Simply blow lots of bubbles for children to catch and pop. Give instructions throughout the game, such as, "Can anyone find two bubbles joined together?" or "Can anyone find a really big/really tiny bubble?"
- Ask children to jump and catch the highest bubble they can reach, and to catch a bubble without bursting it. A good game for developing coordination and spatial awareness.
- Also use the activity to talk about the colours and shapes of the bubbles; children could draw them using coloured chalks on black paper.

Early learning goal: *Negotiate space and obstacles safely, with consideration for themselves and others.*



TRACY JACKSON OBE IS ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF EARLY YEARS, NATIONAL LITERACY TRUST

Help kids reconnect with reading

Early years settings hold the key to growing a generation of readers, says Tracy Jackson OBE...

This year marks the National Year of Reading, an initiative from the Department for Education, in collaboration with the National Literacy Trust, to reconnect the nation's children, young people, and adults with reading through the things that inspire and excite us. While the campaign is for people of all ages, its success begins firmly in the early years.

For early years practitioners, this is a powerful opportunity to recognise, celebrate and strengthen the vital role you already play in growing a generation of readers. It offers a moment to shine a light on the everyday interactions, shared stories and joyful experiences that quietly lay the foundations for a lifelong love of reading.

STARTING EARLY

Children's earliest experiences of language, stories and books shape not only their educational journeys, but also their confidence, wellbeing and sense of belonging in the world. Some stories stay with us long after childhood, and those emotional connections are often formed long before children read independently.

In the case of children with limited access to rich reading experiences at home, early years provision plays a particularly vital role. The National Year of Reading offers an important opportunity for you to celebrate the story-rich environments you already create and to strengthen everyday practices that nurture a love of reading.

BUILDING LANGUAGE

Children begin to understand how language works through everyday interactions – in conversations, shared stories and moments of reading aloud. They experience the rhythm and flow of language through eye contact, turn-taking and listening. These warm, responsive exchanges help children build vocabulary, confidence and meaning together, learning through connection rather than instruction.

Creating regular opportunities for one-to-one and small-group talk ensures that every child feels heard and valued. When adults make space for stories, invite children to share ideas and bring books to life, children start to follow narratives, tell their own stories, and make sense of the world around them. These experiences support the development of comprehension, storytelling, and a lifelong relationship with reading.

NURTURING READERS

Early years practitioners understand that stories are everywhere – in books, play, talk, movement and imagination. Each day, children shape and share stories as they explore, and by making space for them to invent, revisit and extend these narratives, you help nurture imagination, creativity and rich language development. By stepping into children's imaginative worlds, adults send a powerful message:



that storytelling is valued, shared, and meaningful. These moments help children develop narrative skills, empathy, and confidence, supporting them to see themselves not only as storytellers but as readers in the making.

Stories are everywhere – in books, play, talk, movement and imagination

PROVIDING VARIETY

Offering a wide range of books gives children the freedom to choose stories that speak to them. When they can explore titles that reflect their interests and spark their curiosity, reading becomes something they feel drawn into, not directed towards. Similarly, when books reflect children's lives, languages, cultures and communities, reading becomes personal and inclusive, strengthening their sense of belonging and their identity as readers.

Providing a rich mix of texts, from wordless picture books and rhyming stories to information books and audiobooks, offers multiple ways for children to engage with stories and language. Together, choice, variety and representation create environments where every child can find stories that feel meaningful to them.

EXPLORING SOUNDS

From the very beginning, babies and young children are immersed in the sounds and music of language. Songs, nursery rhymes, poems and rhythmic stories help them notice patterns, repetition and melody in spoken words. Through listening and joining in, they tune in to the sounds and rhythms of language long before they encounter print.

Moments of sound, rhythm and music naturally weave through movement and play. Clapping, stamping, singing and playful use of alliterative phrases allow children to connect sound with action, making these experiences memorable and enjoyable. Balancing lively, noisy moments with quieter listening helps

children focus their attention and become more aware of the sounds around them.

These early experiences matter. When children hear, notice and enjoy music and the music of language, they build strong foundations for later reading, having experienced language as something playful, expressive and shared.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Children's engagement with language and reading develops within a rich ecosystem of relationships, across early years settings, at home and in the wider community. Families play a central role in shaping early reading experiences, and early years practitioners are uniquely placed to strengthen the connections between home and setting, building confidence and supporting rich home learning environments. By welcoming families into story experiences and valuing what they already do, you help ensure that every child is surrounded by messages that stories matter, wherever they are shared.

CELEBRATING EARLY YEARS

The National Year of Reading 2026 is a fantastic opportunity for us all to recognise and celebrate the extraordinary work taking place in early years settings across the UK. It invites us to highlight the creativity, care and commitment that practitioners bring to nurturing children's earliest relationships with stories, while strengthening partnerships with families and communities. By placing stories at the heart of early years practice, we can give every child the chance to experience the joy and possibility that reading brings, helping to grow a generation of readers who carry those experiences with them for life.

The National Year of Reading will sit at the heart of the Trust's Early Words Matter conference on 27 March, where thought leaders in early education, literacy, policy and practice will present the benefits of shared reading and storytelling on the developing brain and explore opportunities for families and settings to work together. Find out more and book your ticket at tinyurl.com/TEYwm26

Five ways to INSPIRE A LOVE OF READING

1 Value children's voices

Create environments that encourage children to share their ideas and stories, such as a cosy reading space, puppets on a low shelf or props that spark imagination. When the culture of a setting values children's voices, storytelling is part of everyday life, expressive and enjoyable.

2 Model creative storytelling

Show children that stories do not only come from books. Telling made-up stories, using different voices, dressing up, or inventing characters together helps children see storytelling as playful and accessible. Your enthusiasm often gives children the confidence to try storytelling themselves.

3 Use prompts & shared narratives

Introduce simple story starters such as a mysterious object, an interesting picture, or a "What if...?" question. Group storytelling, where each child adds to the story, helps build confidence, language and understanding.

4 Offer diverse materials

Offer a rich mix of books and storytelling resources, including familiar favourites, wordless picture books and audiobooks, alongside puppets, cards and props. Children can draw on these in different ways, finding entry points that suit their interests and ways of communicating.

5 Go beyond books

Encourage storytelling with families as part of everyday life, through play, outdoor experiences, routines or talking about shared events. These everyday stories help build language, confidence and a lasting love of reading, both at home and in settings.



CHRIS NAYLOR-BALLESTEROS IS AN AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

“Fear is a strange thing”

Chris Naylor-Ballesteros shares how he’s helping young children explore the things that scare them...

A few years ago I visited my old primary school, a place I hadn’t been inside for over 40 years. I’d loved it there as a kid, attending from the age of five in the mid-seventies, and it’s still a really great school. I found it had been extended and the tables and chairs had shrunk. I went into my old classroom and the layout and features chimed with the vague, dreamy memories I had of it. I was visiting to read some of my books and do some drawing, and I thought I’d better be on good form because the only visitors I remembered coming in when I was a pupil were a woman with a fully working scale model of a canal lock and

a man with a massive, live owl (not at the same time, they weren’t a package deal). The locks were glass-sided and full of water, with sluices, culverts, motors and little boats to show how it worked; it was mesmerising. The owl just sat on the man’s hand, deciding whose eyes it might peck out for lunch. It was also mesmerising.

Another thing that I remember from my primary school (but now long gone) was the huge telly on wheels with sun-visors at the sides that looked like bat wings. The only things I remember watching on it were a spooky kids’ drama about a pale-faced and besuited alien man in a quarry (details are sketchy but scary) and then the fear-fest of the pre-summer-holiday Public Information Films (PIFs). Their sole intention was to make us terrified of the clearly lethal world outside. Leaving the big hall in stunned silence we’d probably have been happy to spend the coming six weeks refusing to leave our beds

for fear of farms, building sites, train tracks, pylons, abandoned fridges, escalators, “Lonely Water”, and any/all combinations of cars, roads, pushbikes, motorbikes, traffic lights, prams, rugs, stairs, gas, electric, level crossings, zebra crossings and pelican crossings. “JUST DON’T” seemed to be the basic message.

Anyway I reached adulthood, so they must have worked. The films were hard-hitting and blunt, so much so that they’re now part of the collective memory of 70s and 80s childhoods – once seen, never forgotten. Though I suppose when the aim is to save life and limb, it’s better to go *all in* on the messaging. No one should be left wondering if Donald Pleasance’s “Spirit of Dark and Lonely Water” might actually be a misunderstood and fundamentally decent sort of industrial-pond-dwelling wraith.

FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

Small, unnamed fears are often present elsewhere, quiet and inarticulate, hardly voiced – even to the person feeling them. It’s an instinctive reaction to things we don’t know or don’t understand. Or it’s an irrational response to things that can’t cause us any harm. In 2019 I wrote and illustrated a book called *The Suitcase*. It’s about the sudden appearance of a stranger – a refugee or migrant, a mystery. It’s about uncertainty and not knowing, and trust or doubt.

I didn’t feel that I could write about this stranger’s journey. What I wanted to make a story about was *us*, and how we react to someone or something unknown suddenly arriving. This was during one of the regular periods of frothing media mania about small-boat channel crossings and it struck me how weird it was that human beings, all of us with more-or-less the same



sort of wiring and workings, could have such fundamentally different feelings towards the same situation, the same soaked and cold people wading out of the sea. *The Suitcase* partly came out of those thoughts. I wanted to portray the idea that fear of the unknown or the unexpected is part of being human, and that it's unhelpful to deny it. The point was to show that we might all have misgivings and doubts, and that we try to accept this and engage with the world with trust and good faith, even if we don't fully understand it.

Fear is also explored in one of my books in a series called Frank and Bert, about a fox and a bear who are best friends. In this story a harmless frog causes the discomfort. Though Frank and Bert are best mates, they're different in lots of ways and when they decide to go and play in the pond Bert is upfront about his aversion to amphibians – they scare him and he doesn't care who knows it. Frank is full of reassurance and bravado, but when they come face to face with a little frog on Bert's toy boat, he quite reasonably hopes that Frank will be able to deal with it. Of course, Frank has to admit that he's just as scared as Bert, but he's naturally less inclined to own up to feeling fearful, especially of harmless little things like frogs.

NAVIGATING OUR FEARS

When I went back to my primary school, a forgotten memory resurfaced. The school was built in the 1800s and then extended in the 1960s. Most of my time there as a child was

“Fear of the unknown is part of being human”



in the newer part, but when it rained and we couldn't play out, we were all shepherded into a big room in the old part, to draw or play games. I did not like this room. First of all, there were big boxes full of broken, gnarled pencils or chewed crayons and all the useful or unbroken colours got swiped early on. But there was something else. As a five-year-old, this room scared me, and I don't really know why. The ceiling was very high and the room had rows of neon strip lights suspended on long, pendulous chains. I didn't like the lights or the chains at all. I didn't like the long, church-like windows. Even the door was too big and heavy and ominous. The atmosphere, even though the room was full of children drawing and playing, felt oppressive and even a bit sinister. I never got this feeling in any other room; I just really didn't like *this* one, and hated it when we had to spend playtime in there, always happy

to get out and get back to my comfort zone, even if there might be a hungry-looking owl there. I never told anyone I was scared of a classroom, but the feeling was definitely there, and it was much greater than the sum of its vaguely rational causes.

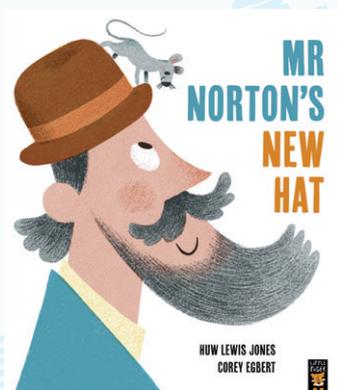
Fear is a strange thing. Sometimes it's good to have a bit of it, especially if you were to survive the perilous health-and-safety minefield of a 70s school holiday. Or it can serve no purpose and only diminish our lives. Sometimes we're happy to own up to it, but often we're not, especially if it makes us look strange or cowardly, because we're scared of a tiny frog or even a classroom. I hope that picture books about fear can help children talk about and acknowledge what makes them scared and maybe figure out why, and see that they're probably not the only ones who feel a bit fearful of all sorts of strange and arbitrary things.



Chris Naylor-Ballesteros is the author and illustrator of many children's books, including the Frank and Bert series, of which the latest title, *The One Where Bert is Scared of Frogs* (Nosy Crow, £7.99), is available now. Visit nosycrow.com

The Book Corner

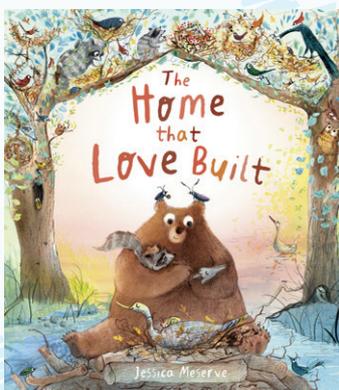
GREAT TITLES TO SHARE WITH YOUR BUDDING READERS
REVIEWED BY EMMA DAVIS



MR NORTON'S NEW HAT

(Little Tiger, Paperback, £7.99)

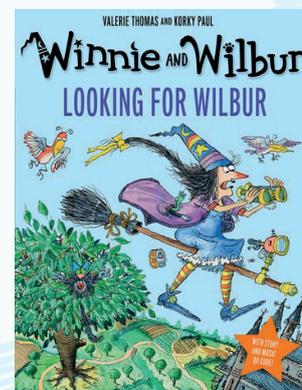
This jolly, rhyming story invites children straight into the fun. The playful rhythm and strong repetition make it ideal for encouraging everybody to join in, predicting what might happen next as events unfold. It's structured around the days of the week, the text introducing an ever-growing array of animals, building through clever accumulative storytelling. The illustrations are rich with visual clues, prompting children to guess what might appear to join the mouse in Mr Norton's hat, the birds in his bicycle basket, or the squirrel tucked into his shoe. Humour runs throughout, balanced with a gentle thread of kindness and consideration for others. In an early years setting, this book works particularly well for group story times, supporting sequencing, early concepts of time, and oral language. The repeated patterns and animal characters also lend themselves to role play, storytelling, and shared discussion, making it a joyful choice for repeated reading aloud.



THE HOME THAT LOVE BUILT

(Little Tiger, Hardback, £12.99)

Powerful and reassuring, Jessica Meserve's *The Home That Love Built* is all about community, cooperation, and hope after disaster. When a devastating flood destroys the animals' homes, it's the tiniest creature of all, a beetle, who begins the journey towards rebuilding. From there, everybody contributes, showing how collective action can avert further harm. The lyrical narrative explores kindness, courage, friendship, and resilience, reinforcing the idea that everybody can make a difference. The story grows in scale, while remaining emotionally accessible for young readers. Beautifully detailed illustrations capture both the drama of the flood and the warmth of the creatures' collaboration, offering plenty to spot and discuss as the pages are turned. It's a book that provides rich opportunities to explore themes of teamwork, empathy, and problem-solving. It also supports sustained shared thinking, small-world play, and discussion around change, overcoming challenges, and caring for one another.



WINNIE AND WILBUR: LOOKING FOR WILBUR

(OUP, Paperback £7.99)

Winnie and Wilbur: Looking for Wilbur is a lively tale of adventure, mischief, and magical determination. After happily joining family picnics in the park, Wilbur curls up under a fluffy blanket for a nap, only to be carried far from home in the back of a campervan. Suddenly separated from him, Winnie sets off on a mission to find her beloved cat, using her usual spells with unpredictable results. Valerie Thomas's story is full of playful twists, humour and moments of chaos, and trying to guess how Winnie will find Wilbur this time keeps children engaged as the adventure unfolds. Korry Paul's detailed illustrations are packed with visual jokes and expressive characters, offering endless talking points. The book supports discussion around emotions such as worry, perseverance, and relief, while also inspiring imaginative play, story retelling, and visual literacy through close observation of the illustrations.

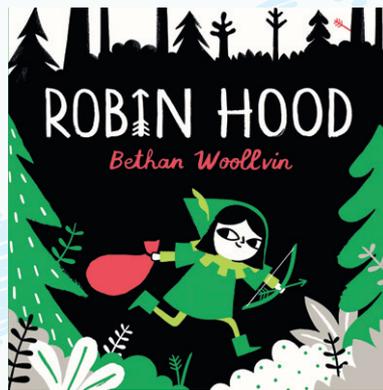
what is a dot?

Johanna Bell & Amelia Luscombe

WHAT IS A DOT?

(Thames & Hudson, Hardback £11.99)

This is a simple yet innovative book designed to inspire mark making, creativity, and thoughtful discussion. Using uncluttered pages and coloured pencil lines that stretch, curve, and travel across the spreads, it invites children to look closely and think imaginatively. Is it a swish? A swirl? Or a sweeping movement across the page? The gentle rhyming text encourages exploration rather than fixed answers, supporting early language development while celebrating process over product. Children are naturally drawn to trace the lines with their fingers, creating a tactile and engaging reading experience. The book supports fine motor development and early writing behaviours, while also encouraging talk, descriptive language, and experimentation. A great example of how something very small can spark big conversations and creative ideas.



ROBIN HOOD

(Two Hoots, Paperback, £7.99)

Bethan Woollvin's *Robin Hood* offers a refreshing twist on this famous tale, placing a mischievous and determined female heroine at the centre of events. Bold and confident, she sets out to right wrongs, maintaining the familiar moral underpinning of fairness and standing up for others. The narrative balances humour with tension as Robin uses her courage and quick thinking to outwit the baddie. Will she succeed? This question keeps children engaged and eager to follow her journey. Bold illustrations give the book a striking visual style, drawing attention to action and character. The engaging story offers a valuable stimulus for discussing fairness, justice, and moral choices, while the strong female lead supports conversations around representation. The book's clear structure and artwork make it ideal for role play, storytelling, and shared discussion.

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Have you seen these fantastic publications?



Hot Food: Nice!

(Walker Books, Paperback, £7.99)

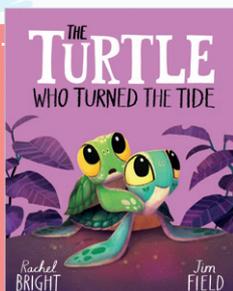
Hot Food: Nice! is a representation of one of Michael Rosen's best-known poems. Built around the repeated refrain "My dad knows everything", its strong rhythm makes it perfect for acting out, with plenty of opportunities to exaggerate the actions and expressions shown in the illustrations. Alongside the humour of the too-hot potato, it comes with the important message of blowing on your food to cool it down before you start eating!



Sticky Mildred

(Walker Books, Paperback, £7.99)

This is a gloriously silly story that quickly escalates from tasty treats to total chaos. After indulging in "Doughnuts and custard! Marmalade tarts! Marshmallows, porridge and jelly hearts!" Mildred becomes so sticky that she starts collecting Mum, Dad, the neighbour's dog, and then far worse. Hilarious illustrations heighten the mayhem, while a gentle message about the importance of having a bath brings the story to a satisfyingly splashy end.



THE TURTLE WHO TURNED THE TIDE

(Hachette Children's Books)

Explore teamwork, listening, and caring for the environment with activities inspired by Rachel Bright's thoughtful story...

- Talk to children about the animals in the story. Why don't they listen to Tula at first? What does the story tell us about small actions making a big difference?
- Play a sound game using animals from the book. Can children make or match animal sounds? Which are loud, quiet, fast, or slow?
- Provide junk modelling and recycled materials and invite children to make their own turtle. What works best for a shell? How can they join pieces together? This can lead to discussions about looking after the natural world.



The Good Deed Dogs

(Walker Books, Paperback, £7.99)

The Good Deed Dogs is a warm story about good intentions and perseverance. Bodger, Billy, and Betty are desperate to help, but carrying the shopping, watering hanging baskets, and hanging out the washing all end in total calamity! Will they finally get the chance to do something right and save the day? Full of humour and heart, this story reassures children that trying matters, even when things go wrong.

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TEY's look at the latest early years tools, toys, books and activities...

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A MISCHIEVOUS MUSICAL

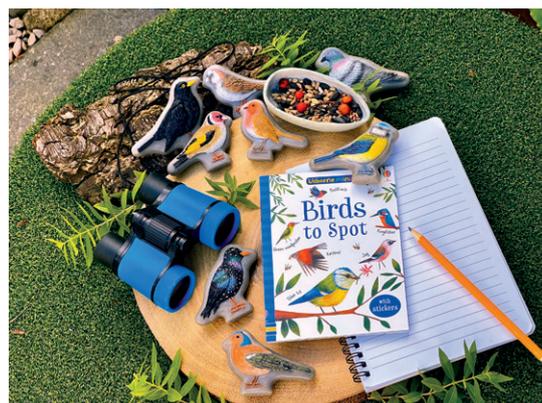
The Enormous Crocodile is weaving his way across the UK in search of delicious little fingers and squidgy podgy knees... Only the other jungle creatures can foil his secret plans and clever tricks, but they're going to have to find a large amount of courage to stop this greedy brute! This mischievous musical based on Roald Dahl's snappy book is heading out on its first UK tour in 2026. Perfect for those aged 3+, *The Enormous Crocodile* offers a wickedly funny musical adventure for those of nursery and primary school age.

Find tour dates and more information at enormouscrocodilemusical.com

Sensory play

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Rocket Phonics First Steps is a flexible introductory phonics programme based on Phases 1–2 of Letters and Sounds. It supports young learners at the start of their reading journey by focusing on oral communication and phonemic awareness. Letter-sounds are introduced in the order of natural speech development, while vocabulary is expanded through engaging flashcards and Big Book stories. Nursery rhymes, simple songs, and phonics-based games help to build confidence, while activity booklets develop early letter-recognition skills by encouraging mark making, strengthening fine motor skills, and supporting emergent handwriting. Lilac and Lilac+ reading books provide plentiful opportunities to demonstrate how to navigate a book and practise early blending.

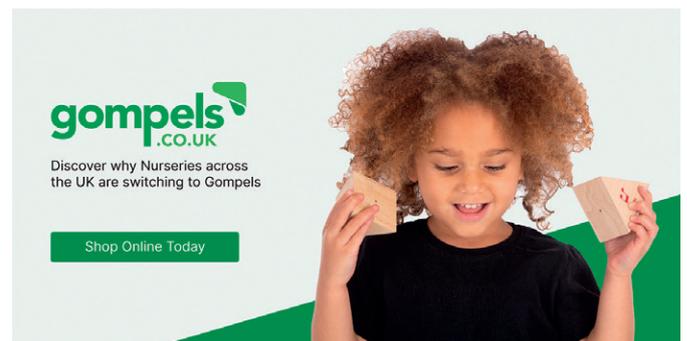
Learn more at hachettelearning.com/reading-planet/rocket-phonics/first-steps



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Expert advice from...



MANDY GUTTADAURO
is company operations director at Bright Little Stars



CATHERINE LYON
is an early years consultant



JAMES HEMSALL OBE
is managing director of Coram Hemsall's

This issue...

61 STAFF RETENTION: HOW WE KEEP OUR TEAM HAPPY

Mandy Guttadauro shares six practical ways in which provider Bright Little Stars works to keep practitioners' morale high.

62 BUILDING A CULTURE OF SAFEGUARDING

Catherine Lyon explores Ofsted's new expectations around safeguarding and explains how leaders can embed good practice in their settings.

64 TRENDS, POLICY, AND PRACTICE FOR 2026

James Hemsall OBE outlines the challenges and opportunities facing the sector this year and explains why early practitioners are more important than ever.

65 CPD BOOKSHELF

Three titles to inform and improve your team's practice, covering topics as diverse as early years science and the developmental stages of becoming a mark maker.

Become a Maths Champion

Giving early years practitioners the confidence, tools and expertise to embed powerful maths learning into every corner of your setting.

Maths Champions from National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) gives your team everything they need to make maths engaging, meaningful and natural in your setting.

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STAFF RETENTION

How we keep our team happy

At Bright Little Stars (BLS), staff happiness grows from genuine care and a culture that has been nurtured since the very beginning. We focus on the following areas:

1 Knowing staff as individuals

Happiness starts with being seen and understood. I take the time to get to know each team member, what motivates them, what they value, how they like to work, and where they want to grow. Conversations go beyond rotas and routines. They include real life, real feelings, and the things that matter both inside and outside of work.

Genuine care shows in small, consistent everyday actions. If someone returns after illness, I check in. If someone is overwhelmed, we offer quiet time with a hot water bottle and blanket or make them a coffee. Leaders ask about family milestones, celebrate children's achievements, and support staff in balancing important life events with work, including covering phones for doctor or school calls.

We celebrate milestones together, including birthdays, baby showers and cultural events, so everyone feels included. Middle leaders are personally trained by me, setting the tone of the company since 2013. Training covers psychological safety, company culture, and expectations for leadership styles, showing the

commitment from director level to ensure consistency across every one of our nurseries.

2 Making them smile

Small gestures make a big difference, especially with the rising cost of living. Staff enjoy treats in the staff room, from hot chocolate jars to seasonal surprises. Daily hot meals help with nutrition and financial pressure; weekly food budgets let teams order what they enjoy most.

On training days, we bring in street food vans or ice cream trucks. These are strategic actions to support and motivate teams, planned, budgeted, and shaped by staff feedback.



Happiness starts with being seen and understood

3 Providing practical support

We aim to reduce daily pressures so staff can focus on the children. Requested shifts are accommodated wherever possible. Staff rooms feature back massage chairs, toastie makers, coffee machines and fully stocked fridges. Our systems for planning, observations, and communication save time to reduce workload.

We have key people to meet statutory welfare ratios, plus two kitchen staff, deputies outside ratios, and full-time administrators.

Each room has a designated lunch cover, an apprentice (outside of ratios), and contracted float staff. We also operate an internal BLS bank of emergency staff, managed by our head-office recruitment manager. This ensures all cover staff are fully trained and

vetted BLS employees, not external agency temps. These levels are above legal requirements to prevent pressure on staff and ensure every room is well supported. This isn't just compliance; it's part of our business plan to make the day run smoothly for everyone.

4 Looking after their wellbeing

Wellbeing is central to our culture. Staff surveys guide actions, and mental health first-aiders are in each nursery. Wellbeing Wednesdays give staff time to talk. Winter wellbeing bags, birthday days off, extra tea breaks, flexible shifts, and our wellbeing app all show staff that we prioritise health.

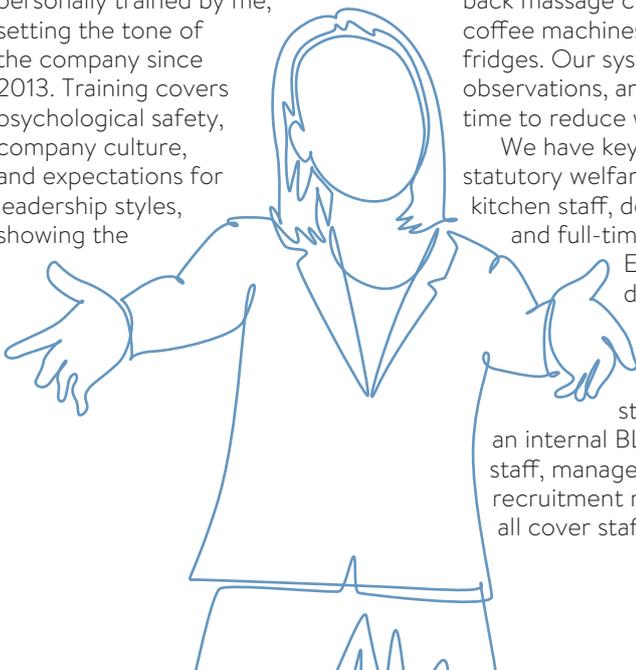
5 Giving them recognition

Recognition drives motivation. Every day we celebrate effort, kindness, and teamwork. Staff receive personalised praise and shoutouts. Children applaud the employee of the month, and our BLS Bucks system rewards excellent work, creativity, and leadership. Staff can use Bucks for vouchers, experience days, or additional annual leave. Long-service awards and our annual Awards Dinner recognise achievements, featuring a restaurant lunch with directors.

6 Creating joyful moments

Celebration strengthens our community. Christmas parties feature headline performers and regular social events, and in-nursery traditions such as advent calendars and Easter egg hunts keep the atmosphere uplifting. Promotions, cultural events, and personal milestones are celebrated during work hours so everyone can take part.

Our success has been achieved through consistency, care and commitment, not token gestures. The practices outlined are designed to support and motivate – because when staff thrive, families thrive too.





Building a culture of safeguarding

Of late, early years education has changed a lot when it comes to safeguarding. It's not just about paperwork or finishing training any more. Ofsted's new EYFS expectations focus on building an authentic culture of safeguarding, where everyone feels ready and able to act together when needed.

Although these may look like minor updates, they indicate that safeguarding is much more than a single task; it should act like a smoke alarm rather than a fire extinguisher, using an ever-present alert system to identify issues before they become emergencies.

A cultural mandate

Recent events in the sector have brought safeguarding back into the national spotlight. Following the arrest last year of nursery worker Vincent Chan for abusing children in his care, public trust has been deeply shaken. Headlines in national newspapers like "Men shouldn't be allowed to work in nurseries" have sparked intense debate, some of which is unhelpful and could undo years of progress in workforce diversity. The issue isn't one of gender, but the fact that when systems fail, warning signs are missed, concerns are not connected,

or staff don't feel safe to speak up. As with serious case reviews, analysing failures enables strategic improvement, ensuring robust systems in which staff are empowered to connect the dots and promptly address concerns. That's why Ofsted's new focus is so important.

What's changed?

The recent EYFS reforms set out clearer rules for safer recruitment, whistleblowing, and responding quickly to concerns:

- References must be obtained before employment begins, and concerns from references must be documented and followed up on.
- Whistleblowing procedures must be accessible to all staff, including volunteers and students.
- New annexes clarify expectations for safeguarding and paediatric first

aid training, as well as actions needed during incidents such as choking.

- Stronger emphasis on attendance tracking and following up on unexplained absences.
- Emergency contact details must be extended, ensuring that all children can be reached through multiple avenues in an emergency.

Professional inquisitiveness

At On the Button (weareonthebutton.com), we see that settings do best when safeguarding is part of daily work, not just something for inspections. We often remind teams, "It could happen here." This isn't meant to scare anyone; it's about being prepared.

Sadly, people who harm others can be charming and fit in easily. They might even be trusted colleagues. That's why it's important to pay attention to small concerns. Staff should feel confident reporting anything that feels wrong before it becomes a bigger problem.

One DSL told us: "I was worried they wouldn't renew On the Button this September. I said I'm not sure I'd want to carry on being a DSL if I didn't have the software. I couldn't go back to paper. It takes too much time. I can't go around every classroom checking sheets. To keep on top of everything, I need something smarter."

Safeguarding is an alert system that helps spot issues before they become emergencies





This sentiment is echoed by others who have noted that using digital solutions can save time each day compared to traditional methods. This time saved can be redirected towards more critical tasks, enhancing the overall effectiveness of safeguarding measures. This kind of commitment shows that systems are not just for collecting data; they help protect people and support teams.

From policy to practice

Paper logs, separate spreadsheets, and relying on memory are no longer enough. When safeguarding information is on paper or spread across emails, essential details can be missed. Digital platforms let staff record and share concerns immediately, connect related issues, and maintain clear records for accountability. Take the example of a setting we work with, Little Learners (not the real name):

“Staff are logging more than ever before,” the DSL shared. “Instead of leaving the room or finding a form, they do it there and then. It’s easier. Everything’s in one place.” Another manager added: “We monitor things more efficiently and accurately. It saves a huge amount of time compared to all the paperwork. And we feel more confident responding to external services when needed.”

These changes aren’t just about paperwork; they help shape a better culture.

Whistleblowing & complaints

The EYFS update also requires clearer whistleblowing processes. Every staff member needs to know *when* and

how to speak up, and to trust that the system will support them. This is especially important if the concerns involve colleagues. If whistleblowing feels risky or unclear, staff might not speak up. Senior teams now need to ensure everyone feels safe raising concerns without fear of punishment.

Complaints from families should also be considered potential safeguarding issues. If a parent asks about a bruise or a concerning interaction, it shouldn’t be dismissed. It needs to be regarded as part of the whole picture.

“We feel this pain on all fronts,” one safeguarding lead at On the Button commented in response to recent events. “Kudos to the person who whistle-blew. But how did this go on for so long? Systems should encourage professional curiosity and make it easy to report anything that doesn’t feel right, about anyone.”

Modelling the right culture

In the end, making safeguarding part of daily life starts with leaders. They need to talk about it openly, not just in training but also in meetings and handovers. Leaders should ask questions, encourage staff to reflect, and show that raising concerns is a positive thing.

A setting’s safeguarding culture depends on what leaders *do* each day. When managers show they are attentive, open, and follow through, staff are likely to do the same. It also helps to take time to reflect. Ask yourself: What’s working? What’s missing? What can we improve? With the right tools and mindset, settings can move from reacting to problems to preventing them.

FIVE WAYS TO EMBED A SAFEGUARDING CULTURE

1 Log concerns in real time – empower staff to record even low-level worries immediately; avoid delays that bury important flags.

2 Unite safeguarding, complaints & wellbeing records – collate welfare notes, parent complaints, staff observations and incident reports in one system to spot emerging patterns.

3 Strengthen safer recruitment and reference-checking – ensure references are gathered *before* employment, document follow-ups on any concerns, and track all checks clearly.

4 Normalise whistleblowing and low-level concern logging – make it easy and safe for staff (or volunteers) to raise anything that feels “off”, including safeguarding concerns about colleagues.

5 Leadership engagement and reflection – make safeguarding a regular topic in team meetings and handovers, review logs collectively, and ask: “Are systems working? What needs improving?”

It’s time to lead

When children are safer, staff are more confident, and everyone knows what to do, the pressure eases, and good decisions follow. This reduces stress and leads to better decisions. But it takes effort to make this happen. On the Button is proud to support this shift by making it easier to log, share, and respond to safeguarding concerns in real time.

Safeguarding isn’t about ticking boxes. It’s about showing, every day, that we care enough to act.



Trends, policy, and practice for 2026

The early years and childcare sector has always been dynamic, shaped by shifting demographics, government priorities, and the evolving needs of families. The welcome expansion of places, new Department for Education (DfE) policies, and a renewed focus on tackling child poverty are all converging to create opportunities. For early years practitioners, this moment demands reflection, adaptation, and leadership.

A sector in transition

The government's commitment to expanding places continues to reshape the supply and demand equation across schools, PVI and childminding. We believe that parents are increasingly seeking flexible, affordable, and high-quality provision. The extension of funded hours for working families, alongside targeted support for disadvantaged families, is driving different patterns of demand.

Yet supply is not evenly distributed – will it ever be, and should it be, I wonder? Urban centres may experience oversupply, while rural and coastal areas continue to struggle. Recruitment and retention of staff remain critically important, with workforce growth needed to underpin expansion and delivery. The aim is not only to create more places, but to ensure those places are sustainable, inclusive, and staffed by skilled professionals.

Integration & collaboration

The rollout of Family Hubs represents a significant policy double-take. Designed to provide a single access point for families, they integrate health, education, and social care services. For us, this means working more closely with colleagues across disciplines, sharing

information, and co-designing support pathways.

Family Hubs aren't just about efficiency; they're about equity. By reducing fragmentation, they aim to ensure families receive timely and coordinated support. For us, this requires skills in partnership working and a willingness to see our role as part of a wider ecosystem of support. Our priority, as demonstrated in our Moving the Box programme, is to ensure the children who need more support get it.

Raising standards

Stronger Practice Hubs are emerging as centres of excellence, disseminating evidence-based practice, mentoring settings, and driving continuous improvement. Their role is to ensure that expansion does not come at the expense of quality.

For us, Hubs offer professional development opportunities and access to cutting-edge research. They also raise expectations: we're expected to

engage with evidence, reflect critically on practice, and contribute to sector-wide learning. The message is clear – quality must be embedded at every level, and early years practitioners of all types are central to achieving this.

A policy framework

Best Start in Life provides the overarching vision. It emphasises the importance of the first five years, recognising them as foundational for lifelong outcomes. Investment in early years is framed not just as childcare, but as education, health, and social policy. Great!

This whole approach challenges us to think outside our rooms. It asks us to consider how our work contributes to reducing inequalities, supporting parental wellbeing, and preparing children for learning at school and beyond. The emphasis on early intervention means we're increasingly seen as front-line agents of social change. Double great!

Addressing inequality

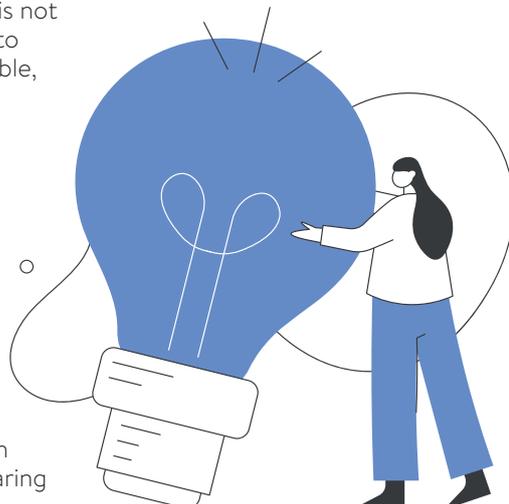
No discussion of early years trends is complete without acknowledging child poverty. The government's child poverty strategy, published in December 2025, seeks to reduce the number of children growing up in deprivation, recognising the profound impact poverty has on learning and development. There were 73 mentions of childcare – excellent!

For early years, this translates into a dual responsibility: delivering high-quality pedagogy while also being attuned to the wider circumstances of children's lives. It requires sensitivity, resilience, and advocacy. Educators must be prepared to identify needs, signpost families to support, and adapt practice to ensure inclusivity.

Emerging trends

Looking forward, several trends are likely to shape the sector:

75%
DfE GLD target for five-year-olds



NURSERY MANAGEMENT

- **Digital integration:**

Technology will play a greater role in administration, communication with families, and even pedagogy. Educators will need digital confidence to harness these tools effectively and safely.

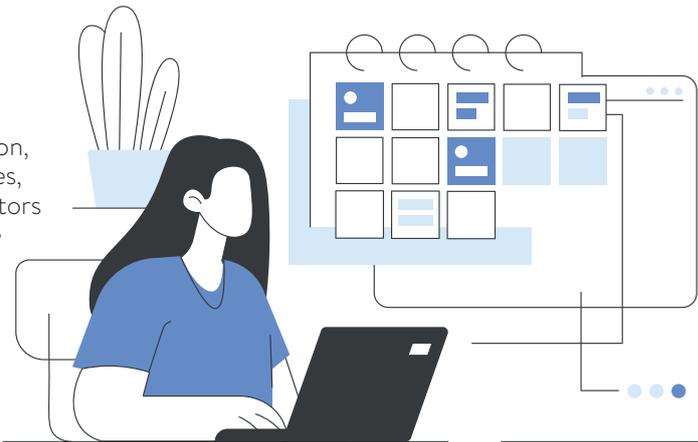
- **Flexible provision:**

As family structures and working patterns diversify, demand for flexible hours and hybrid models of care will grow. And with families being able to claim upfront childcare costs for the first time via Universal Credit, then demand may gather pace.

- **Workforce development:**

Recruitment and retention strategies will increasingly focus on career pathways, professional recognition, and wellbeing.

- **Equity and inclusion:** Policies will continue to prioritise disadvantaged children, with funding and accountability mechanisms tied to outcomes.



73
*Mentions of
childcare in the
child poverty
strategy*

GOV.UK

What this means

The expansion of places, the integration of services, and the emphasis on quality and equity all point to one conclusion: early years practitioners are more important than ever. Our role is not just to deliver curriculum alone, but to act as connectors between families and services, between research and practice, and between policy and lived experience.

We will need to embrace continuous professional development,

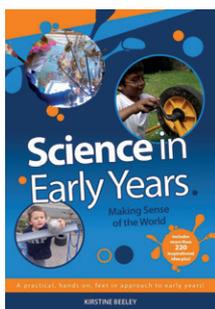
engage with evidence, and cultivate resilience. We will also need to advocate for the profession, ensuring that expansion is matched by investment in workforce conditions and recognition. Above all, we must hold on to the core purpose of early years education: to give every child the best possible start in life. In a landscape of change, that purpose remains constant.

For more information, visit coramhempalls.org.uk

CPD BOOKSHELF

THREE READS THAT WILL IMPROVE YOUR PRACTICE...

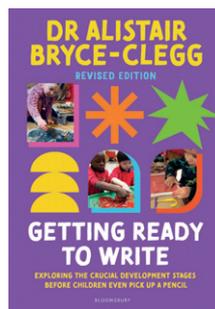
Science in Early Years
(Kirstine Beeley, £17.99)



Kirstine Beeley is in her element here, sharing advice and inspiration that combine two of her passions: science and early years. Her mission is to show that scientific learning doesn't have to come from formal teaching; rather, she argues, it emerges as children explore an enabled environment, asking questions and trying to find the answers themselves. Packed with ideas, this resource should be in every early years setting.

Visit playingtolearn.co.uk

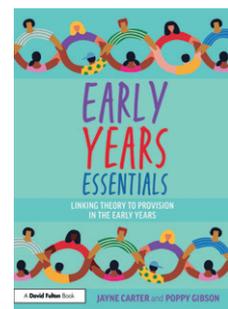
Getting Ready to Write
(Dr Alistair Bryce Clegg, £22)



Understanding the developmental stages of becoming a mark maker is essential for preparing children to become confident writers. Starting with the theory and latest research findings, then providing step-by-step practical ideas for your setting (both inside and out), this guide by the marvellous Dr Alistair Bryce Clegg has everything you need to support your learners as they get ready for writing in Key Stage 1.

Visit bloomsbury.com

Early Years Essentials
(Jayne Carter & Poppy Gibson, £28.99)



Linked to the EYFS framework and drawing on a wide range of case studies from across the sector, this fascinating book shows what excellent provision looks like in practice alongside summaries of key research. Each chapter includes a “pondering question” which offers the reader the opportunity to reflect on their own knowledge, as well as providing a framework to consider how to enhance their own teaching skills.

Visit routledge.com

“I love children, but...”

*Even the best early years educators don't get along with all their charges, says the **Secret Practitioner**...*

I have a secret. A terribly, weighty secret that I've been carrying around ever since I started working in early years settings, just over two decades ago (I know, I know – I can't quite believe it myself). It's something I can't tell anyone. Not family or friends, and certainly not anyone I work with – even though, actually, they are probably the people who would benefit most from knowing it.

Want to know what it is?

Okay then. Because this is anonymous – and only under that condition – I'm ready to confess. My carefully concealed, awful truth is this: I don't like all children. Not only that, I've looked after more than a handful of children whom I would say I've actively *disliked*.

It's the ultimate taboo – in teaching generally, but especially in the early years. We don't do this job for the massive pay packet, after all, and I've never worked in a nursery that didn't stay open for 51 weeks of the year, so extended holidays aren't really a thing, either. The only possible reason, therefore, for choosing this as a career must be that we just *love* children. Right?

them. Every time one of my charges learns something new, or reaches a developmental milestone (no matter how "early" or "late" it might be), it's as exciting as the first time I witnessed such a thing.

But do I *like* them all? No. No way.

Because here's the thing: children are, ultimately, little people. They are all different. From the moment they're born, they are shaped by their closest family and the environment into which they've arrived – and that's not even taking into account their genetic preprogramming. By the time I meet them, they're already a fair way along in terms of fundamental character development; I don't like, or expect to like, every adult I encounter, so why on earth would it be different for younger versions?

I really hope it goes without saying, but I'll spell it out anyway: never in a million years would I let my dislike for a particular child influence how I treat them. I'm as kind, fair, fun and loving with the little ones I'd really rather not be around as I am with those I find more "sympa", as they put it in France. They get as much of my time, my records and reports are just as detailed, and my communications with their parents are every bit as positive, thorough and enthusiastic.

I am, in short, a professional. And that's really why I'm writing this, albeit not in a way that would enable anyone to identify me. Because in fact, nurturing *every* child in our care, to the best of our ability, regardless of personal preference (or prejudice), is one of the most important things we bring to our role as practitioners. It isn't easy – I'm also a parent, and trust me, there are times when each of my three children has been very aware that I'm not liking them very much in that particular moment – but it is an important and precious responsibility, which we take very seriously and for which, I think, we deserve more recognition than we often get.

I know I can't be the only one who feels like this. I'm sure that most teachers could come up with a list of children they've taught while actively disliking them at the time. We just don't talk about it.

Maybe, if we did, it might all get a bit easier.



“Children are little people. They are all different”

Actually, I would say that, generally speaking, I *do* love children. I love their curiosity, their energy, and their total lack of filter when it comes to pointing out how squishy my tummy is, or what a weird colour I've chosen to paint my nails. I adore seeing them develop, gently guiding them towards more ambitious choices and bolder challenges, and helping them unravel the mysteries of the world around



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STRESSED BY FUNDING?

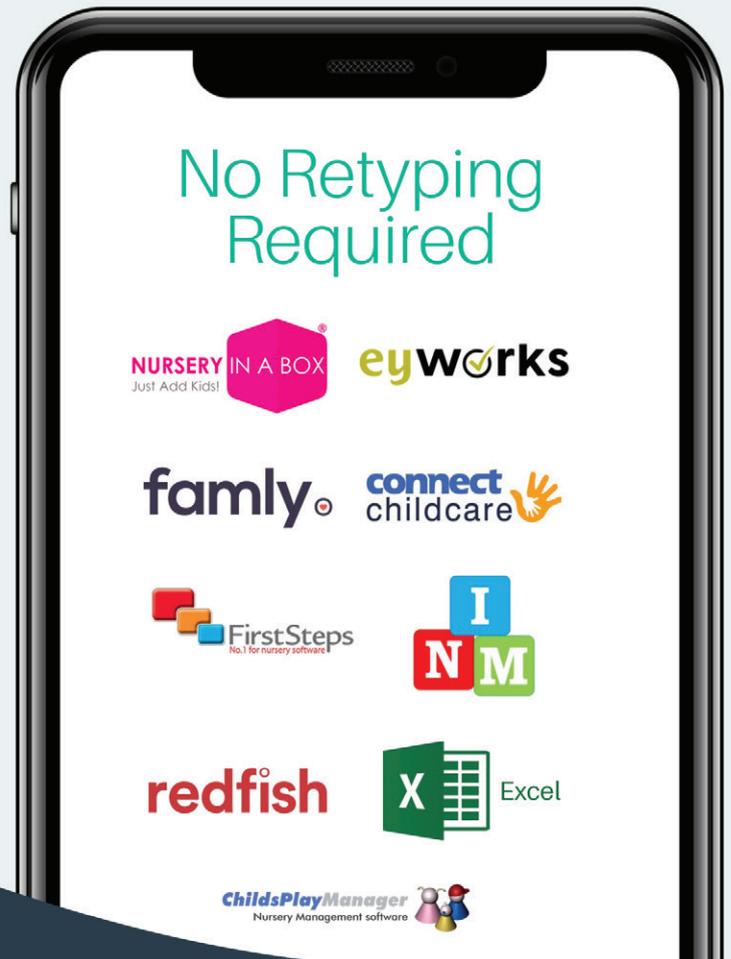
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