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Hello



Creativity is at the heart of what makes us human – from our capacity to invent our way to solutions to tricky problems, to our desire to express ourselves through works of art. But despite its importance, the creative spark is sometimes lacking in formal education. As pupils progress through their schooling, a

“teach-to-the-test” approach can take hold, inadvertently stifling – or at least failing to nurture – skills that many employers are crying out for (to say nothing of the intrinsic value of being able, and wanting, to create).

The same can't be said of early years. Creativity is at the fore when children are given time to play, led by their imagination; to solve challenges they encounter as they do so; and to express themselves in a host of ways – whether that's by making marks on the ground with a stick, mixing up a concoction in the mud kitchen, moving their bodies to music, directing events in a small-world scene, or painting/drawing/assembling representations of whatever most interests them at the time.

In this issue, you'll find suggestions of ways to inspire creativity – for example, in our focus on “hot and cold” (from page 44) – but also insights into what adults can learn about children from their artistic endeavours (page 42). And there's a timely reminder from page 16 of why those starting Reception shouldn't be pushed towards more rigid methods of learning too soon.

Helen Mulley – Commissioning Editor



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“I'll take a Piglet over a Tigger any day!”



THE EXPERTS...



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Nursery Now

News and views from the early years



In brief...

NDNA has highlighted the inequality of the government's expanded free school meals programme; while it includes all early years children in school-based nurseries, those in PVI settings aren't eligible. Chief Executive Tim McLachlan has called for it to be extended to all nursery-aged children. Read more about the programme at tinyurl.com/TEYfsm26



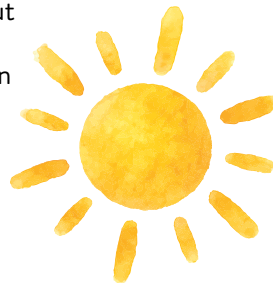
Following a reshuffle brought about by Andy Burnham's appointment as Prime Minister, the DfE has confirmed that Paul Waugh MP is the new early education minister. He will work under the new education secretary, Lucy Powell, who has taken over from Bridget Phillipson.



Analysis commissioned by The Food Foundation and Sustain suggests the government could make "significant" social and economic gains by investing in the Healthy Start scheme, which provides a nutritional safety net for pregnant women and families with children under four on very low incomes.

Extreme heat

In the wake of a scorching summer across the UK, the Early Years Alliance has called upon the government to do more to help nurseries, preschools and childminders operate safely during extreme heatwaves, particularly in relation to the care of babies and young children, as the former are unable to regulate their own temperature. The Alliance notes that new safe sleep guidance from the DfE states that the ideal temperature of a baby's room should be 16–20°C, but gives no information on what should happen if the upper figure is exceeded – despite such temperatures becoming increasingly common.



"Much more support and evidence-based guidance from government is needed on the best ways to keep babies and young toddlers safe in extreme heat."

NEIL LEITCH, CEO, EARLY YEARS ALLIANCE

TWEET TALK

@FoundationYears

From conversations and story time during play, everyday interactions help build a love for reading. Our latest Pathways to Progress Part 3 is packed with practical, evidence-informed ideas you can use in your setting straight away. Listen to Part 3 zurl.co/KhOHU

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Think-tank founded by former Children's Commissioner for England Baroness Anne Longfield urges new PM Andy Burnham to create a cabinet-level children and families unit to support rising numbers of disadvantaged children. Read more: buff.ly/rrIYlnZ

@CoalitionEdCare

If we want an early education and childcare system that works for children, families, the economy and those delivering it, we need to work together. EECC Connect is a new place to share insight and build collective voice. earlyeducationchildcare.org/eecc-connect

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THE AMOUNT THE AVERAGE NURSERY PAYS IN BUSINESS RATES EACH YEAR; NDNA IS CALLING FOR THE 20% DISCOUNT FOR PUBS AND CLUBS TO BE EXTENDED TO THE SECTOR TO HELP STRUGGLING PROVIDERS.



“The clear evidence in this world-first review into the impact of screen use on babies is shocking to read.”

**DAME ANDREA LEADSOM,
FOUNDER, 1001 CRITICAL DAYS
FOUNDATION**

Parent opinions

A DfE survey of parents shows that 71% of those with children aged 0–4 rate the overall quality of local childcare provision as very or fairly good. Visit tinyurl.com/TEYeypt

New research highlights the dangers of early screen time

That young children often receive more screen time than is healthy will come as no surprise to early years practitioners, but a new report – *Impacts of Screen Time, Media and Technology Use on Under 2s during the first 1001 Critical Days* – commissioned by the 1001 Critical Days Foundation and authored by the interdisciplinary Action on Digital Device Immersive Conditions Team (iADDICT), provides “the most comprehensive review yet of all available global research” into the topic, and some alarming findings.

The report pulls no punches, noting in its opening sentence: “The benefit of digital screen exposure for babies is negligible, while the potential risks of use on physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development are substantial.” From there, it highlights how screen time for the under-tuos has become a “cultural norm” despite this risking an array of negative effects: from increasing the risk of over-stimulation and negatively impacting sleep to links with autism spectrum disorder-like symptoms, delayed development in later years, and even damage to developing optic nerves. The report also suggests that screens are increasingly taking on the roles of caregivers – for example, soothing, entertaining and regulating emotion, which in turn may be “weakening attachment and contributing to later social isolation”.

Despite the huge weight of evidence, and the guidance that exists for parents, the report states that most are not following the advice to restrict or, better, avoid screen time in the early years, largely due to their busy lifestyles and the efficiency with which screens command children’s attention. The iADDICT team are now conducting research into tools for professionals and parents that might help reduce the risks posed to babies by the screen use identified.

Read the full report at tinyurl.com/TEY1001st



T LEVEL TAKE-UP RISES

Statistics released by the government in August have revealed that the number of students completing a T Level in Education and Early Years increased by over 50% in the 2025–26 academic year. In total, 3,870 students gained the qualification (up from 2,496 in the previous year), which made it the most popular T Level pathway over that time period. In total, 17.4% of students received a “Distinction”, the highest mark available, with 52.5% receiving a “Merit”. Introduced in 2021, the Education and Early Years T Level is a two-year qualification whose graduates go on to a variety of in-setting roles as well as educational degrees.

17%

INCREASE IN THE
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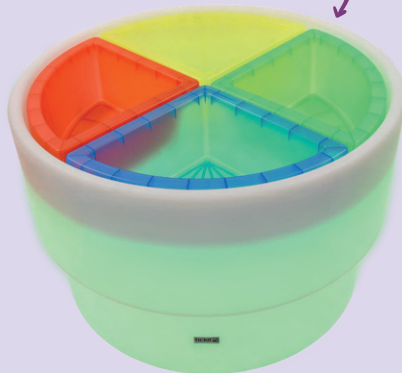
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TIM MCLACHLAN IS CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF NDNA

“Capacity may be cut by a third”

*Unexpected changes to what are deemed safe sleeping arrangements will have widespread consequences, says **Tim McLachlan**...*

Babies and young children are at their most vulnerable at two crucial points in nurseries: when they are asleep and when they are eating. We know this is why the government has brought in stricter guidance in these two areas to prevent avoidable deaths in early years settings.

It is pertinent that the guidance has been issued now that there are more babies in nurseries due to the expansion. It also results from two high-profile nursery deaths, those of Genevieve Meehan and Noah Sibanda. Understandably the government wants to ensure no children suffer similar, totally avoidable fates. But providers are faced with urgent questions about how to implement this new guidance.

Many NDNA members have contacted us about coracles, which nurseries often use as they allow staff to easily keep eyes on all the children sleeping in a room. Until recently, settings believed these were safe to use, but the DfE has now clarified that coracles are no longer deemed safe for babies under 12 months because of a coroner's Prevention of Future Deaths report. In that case, a baby died of postural asphyxiation related to a different product where the lowered side presented the risk. Although this was not in a coracle bed, their sloping sides could potentially result in a similar accident. The new EYFS does not mention coracles, pods, beanbags or sleep nests, but it specifically states that *only* Moses baskets and specified cots are suitable for babies.

While we understand why the government is taking this zero-tolerance approach, it has been extremely difficult for some nurseries to implement it in time for

September's EYFS. Cots and travel cots can be more expensive and take up more space. Exchanging existing coracles will cost on average between £2,000–£3,000 per nursery, and the government has provided no financial aid. It's also very difficult to buy travel cots currently due to the higher demand that exists.

Cots can be more expensive and take up more space

What's more, our short summer survey concluded that there is likely to be a 32% reduction in capacity, with 5% of respondents reporting that they might not be able to offer places to babies as a result, which we know was not the government's intention.

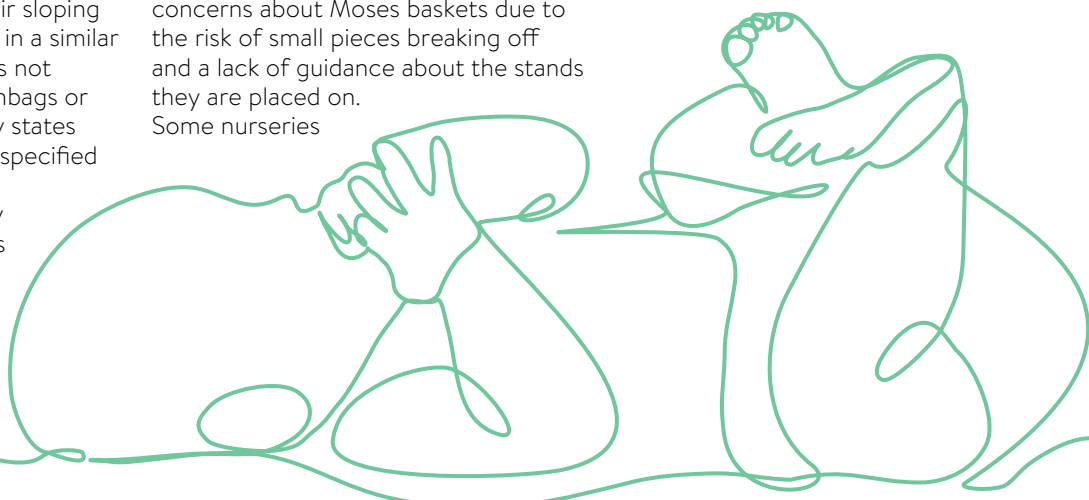
The appalling cases of Genevieve and Noah were due to malevolent actions of individuals within environments with unsafe sleep practices. The journey to safe sleep is about learning from those experiences. We are not aware of any documented cases of coracles directly resulting in baby deaths. We have also flagged concerns about Moses baskets due to the risk of small pieces breaking off and a lack of guidance about the stands they are placed on. Some nurseries

also feel that it's more difficult to keep an eye on children in travel cots, as you have to lean over to look in to fully see the child inside.

Coracles have become a huge challenge for nurseries now they have been told these are unsafe for babies. NDNA has pressed the DfE on the financial implications and asked for financial support for the sector as well as an update on the issue of capacity, as we still don't know the outcome of the floor space consultation from 2025. Regarding inspections, we have stressed the need for Ofsted to be flexible where settings have cots on back-order that have not arrived before September. And we have queried how inspectors judge those forest school nurseries that are entirely outdoors where babies and toddlers sleep in buggies. At the time of going to press, we are still awaiting clarity on these points.

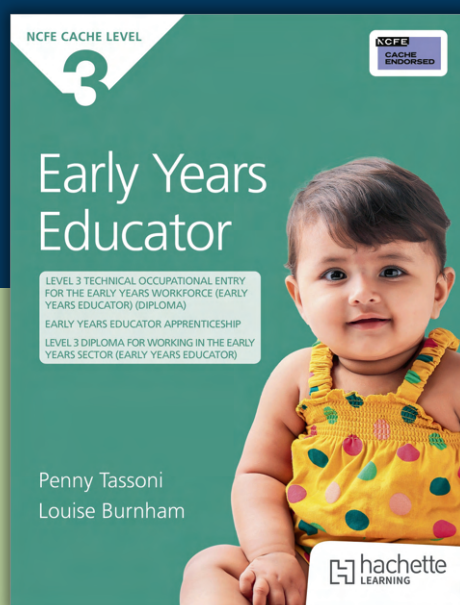
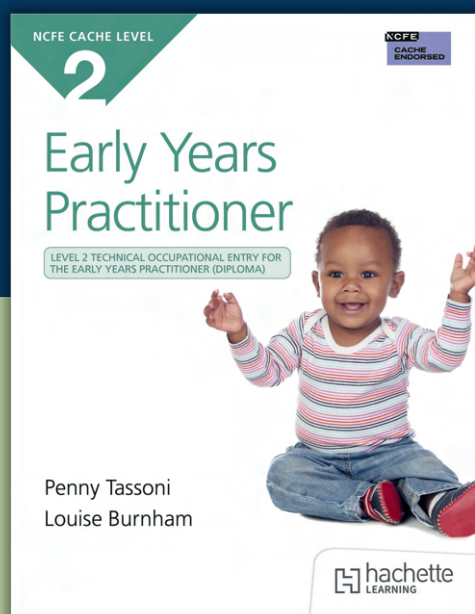
The DfE seems unwilling to change its mind on which types of beds are safe and which are not; the EYFS is now what nurseries will be inspected on. However, it is equally important that nurseries are supported to implement these unexpected changes safely and sustainably.

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NEIL LEITCH IS CEO OF THE EARLY YEARS ALLIANCE

“Low-income families continue to lose out”

Providing places for disadvantaged children is key to a successful early years system, says Neil Leitch...

One of the most frustrating things about dealing with government is that when a new policy is rolled out, there is often a refusal to acknowledge that it might possibly have any shortcomings. How many times, for example, has the sector warned of the impact of underfunding on the early years sector, only to be met with copy-and-paste statements about “record investment into the sector”?

So it is more than a little significant that in one of her final speeches as education secretary, Labour MP Bridget Phillipson chose to speak of the limitations of one of the government’s most high-profile education policies: the early entitlement expansion. Yes, she said, the rollout of “government-funded childcare” is a “huge step forward”. But, as she went on to say, “we also know there are families this does not and will not reach, families who cannot afford quality childcare, because they aren’t working, or aren’t working enough to qualify”.

There has long been a sharp tension between the rhetoric of the current government, which has a clear and proud focus on social mobility and ensuring that all children get the best start in life, and the realities of the early entitlement offer, which focuses primarily on supporting “working families”. But this was the first time I can remember this tension being so openly acknowledged by a senior member of the government.

We at the Early Years Alliance are clear that a successful early years system is one that ensures every child – and especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds – can access affordable, high-quality

provision. Yet, the fact remains that it is those children most in need of support who continue to lose out.

It wasn’t long ago that the DfE published its latest parent survey, showing that families with annual incomes under £20,000 were far less likely to access formal care and early education than those with higher incomes. But of course, when you look at the current system, it’s not hard to see why. As it stands, the majority of early entitlement hours are accessible only to eligible working families, meaning that many of the children who would gain the most from quality education and care are frozen out.

Words alone do little to change the reality

Worse still, many of the government policies intended to close this access gap are failing to do so. Research from the Sutton Trust and Social Market Foundation found that the first phase of government plans to create 3,000 school-based nurseries failed to reach areas of deprivation, with just 16% of new providers established in the most disadvantaged schools.

There’s no question that there has been a greater focus on supporting those most in need under the current government – not least as underlined in the Best Start in Life strategy. But words alone do little to change the reality. We know that many settings don’t have the resources or the funding they need to remain sustainable without, for example, charging high fees for additional hours or services, or structuring

their sessions in such a way that it is incredibly difficult for families to access genuinely “free” provision.

This, of course, goes against the principle of “free” care and education. But until this sustained underfunding is addressed, accessing early years provision will continue to be a postcode lottery. If we are to ensure that all families are supported to find affordable, high-quality places that meet their needs, we must start with funding that reflects the true cost of delivering quality care and education. And in the longer term, once the sector is on a stable financial footing, we must surely look at eligibility, with a view to ensuring that early education is funded equally for all children, regardless of family income.

With a new Prime Minister now in post, we as a sector are once again preparing to work with a new early years minister and education secretary. We’re clear that as the government reassesses its policy priorities for the years ahead, early education – and crucially, the need for every child to benefit from it – must be at the heart of the forward agenda.

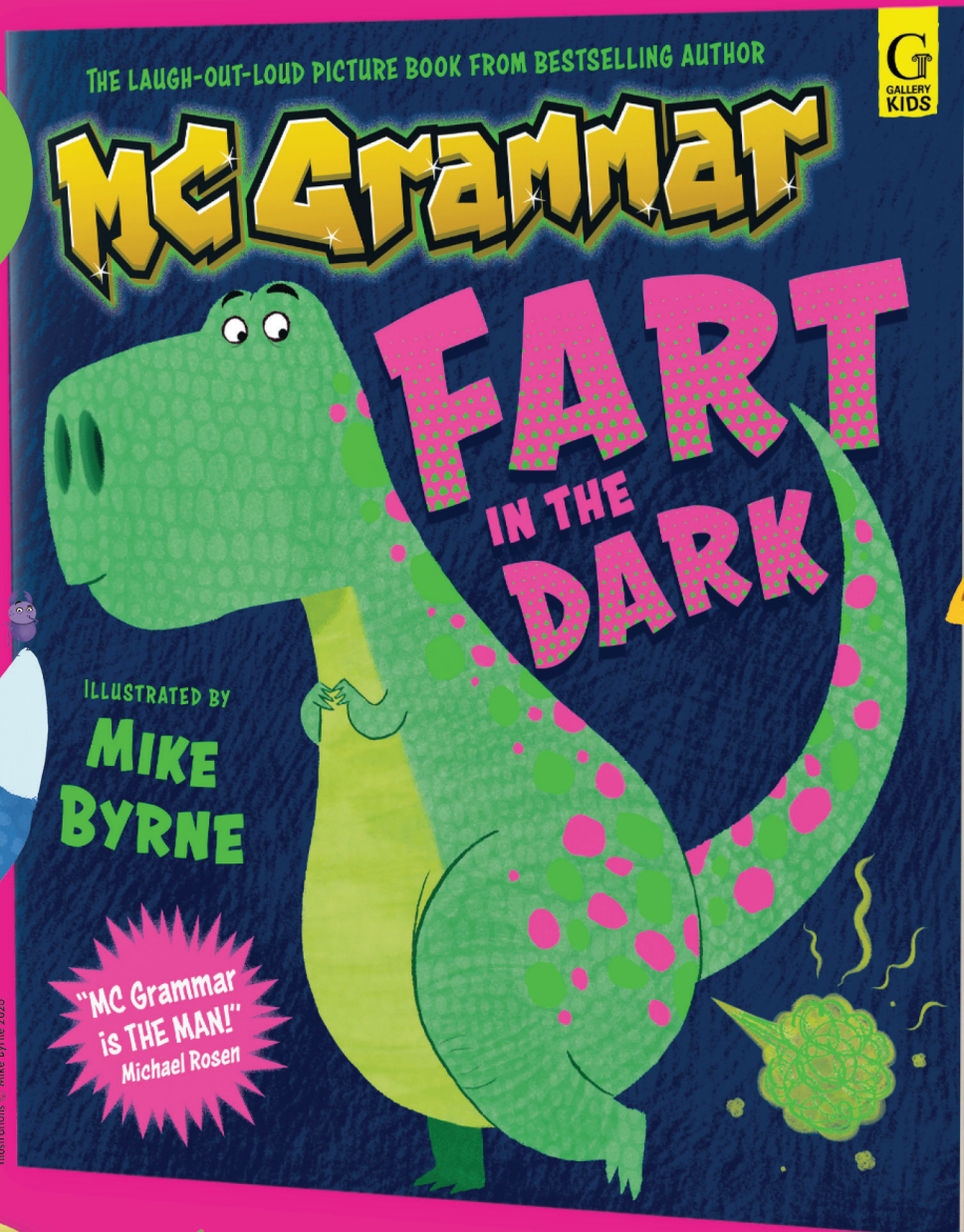
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NIKKY SMEDLEY IS A WRITER, EDUCATOR AND PASSIONATE ADVOCATE FOR THE CHILD

HOW TO SPEAK CHILD

Don't be afraid!

WHAT ARE YOU FRIGHTENED OF?

"I don't know yet..."

"There is nothing to fear but fear itself" – that's the famous quote, isn't it? Well I don't know about you, but I can find plenty of other things to be afraid of. Had the person who first said that never seen a spider, or been up a long ladder, or found themselves unexpectedly out of their depth in the ocean, or whatever it is that is your personal *bête noire*?

The trouble is, of course, that fear is catching. I inherited my disabled mother's understandable terror of being in water, aided and abetted by a primary school teacher pushing me into the deep end of the pool because he thought I was being a wimp!

It's all too easy for little sponge-brained children to pick up on adult worries

It's true I could swim perfectly well, but only with the security of being able to touch the bottom. That's a powerful metaphor for many anxieties, I think. Later on in life, when I'd shaken off that fear and turned into a proper water baby, I'm sorry to say that I continued to hold a grain of resentment against my mum for having instilled it in me in the first place.

We all know the importance of modelling and I'm sure each of us endeavours to put forward our best selves in an attempt to give our children a positive role model to learn from, but this becomes much harder when our deep-seated emotions are involved. Worse still, if your fight-or-flight response is triggered, it makes perfect sense to your brain to behave in a way that you feel protects your charges from the perceived danger. Unfortunately,

this behaviour can put us in the position of my poor old mum, and it doesn't do our children any favours either.

So we're in a quandary. It's almost inhuman to be completely fearless as an adult, so how do we avoid passing on our distress to our young charges, whether it's a mild discomfort, a justifiable trepidation or a full-blown phobia?

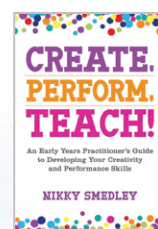
Where possible, such as with something relatively trivial, like a hatred of a particular foodstuff, it's best to keep it to yourself if you can. With stronger reactions that are harder to mask, it may be feasible to employ the services of the other staff available to you – especially if they can take over temporarily while you remove yourself from the scene as calmly as you can muster!

This also holds true for those areas where what you feel is not fear exactly, but is a certain level of discomfort, such as when faced with having to lead your children in an activity a little out of your comfort zone. Lateral thinking can be of help here. Is there someone in class, in school or even within the parent body who would be willing to offer a session to boost the children's experience in this field?

The most important thing is to avoid implanting a new concern in a child's mind. These are anxious times and it's all too easy for little sponge-brained children to pick up on adult worries, internalising them and carrying them forward in their own lives. Security is everything to the very young and without that feeling of safety, it's impossible for them to learn anything.

Many years ago, I decided that the differentiation between Us and Them was whether a person believed that fun was our friend and fear the enemy or vice versa. Sadly our world is firmly in the hands of the latter, but surely childhood should be a time when fun can be our very best friend of all. It's up to us all to work to ensure that this is the case for as long a period of time as possible, even if it causes us a little personal uneasiness from time to time!

LEARN MORE



Nikky's book **Create, Perform, Teach!** (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, £15.99) is a hands-on guide to using creative and performative methods to deliver the Early Years Foundation Stage. It's available now from Amazon.





LOUISE WILDE IS AN EARLY YEARS TEACHER & FOREST SCHOOL LEAD

“You don’t need acres of land”

Instead of focusing on the limitations of their space, Louise Wilde and her team changed their approach, creating an outdoor environment that’s making a real impact...

Our school, a primary in Birmingham, didn’t have a field. What it had was blue safety surfacing, a space that wasn’t really being used for anything meaningful, and children who needed more than it was giving them.

The first time one of our nursery children lay flat on their back in The Nest, just looking up at the sky, everything else just stopped. No calling out, no fidgeting, no adult prompting. Just stillness. This was a child who usually found it hard to regulate, suddenly completely calm in a space

that hadn’t even existed just a few months earlier.

This amazing moment didn’t come from a big budget or a perfectly designed outdoor area. It came from doing something different with what we already had.

A PLACE FOR NATURE

Like a lot of inner-city schools, our outdoor space wasn’t awful, but it wasn’t doing much either. At the same time, many of our children didn’t have access to outdoor space beyond school – no gardens, limited trips to parks and very little chance to just be

in nature. You could see it in how some children struggled to engage, regulate or sustain interaction. The Nest came from a simple question: what do our children actually need more of? It wasn’t more equipment. It was something different.

And so The Nest was born. It includes a raised wildlife pond, a bug hotel, a wormery, bird feeders and a bird box with a solar camera so children can observe nature closely. The space also features a sensory reading nook, mud kitchen, role-play Ranger Station and investigation resources such as magnifiers, identification guides and weather-monitoring equipment to encourage hands-on science and communication. Natural materials, reclaimed wood, planting and communication boards have been used throughout to create a calm, nature-rich environment that supports curiosity, wellbeing and child-led exploration.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Creating The Nest wasn’t about a big transformation overnight. It was built bit by bit, and it’s still changing now.

We used reclaimed materials wherever we could – logs, pallets and natural elements – and focused on building the space up gradually rather than trying to get it done all at once. A small amount of funding helped us add key features, like a pond, but some of the simplest things have had the biggest impact. If I’m honest, some of the most expensive equipment we’ve had over the years hasn’t had half the impact.

The biggest challenge wasn’t budget – it was mindset.

Shifting thinking from our space as an “outdoor play area” to something that actually supports wellbeing and learning took time. We also had to





be really clear with children about caring for the space: no picking plants, respecting resources, and understanding that this is something we look after together.

IN PRACTICE

The Nest is now part of our daily provision in nursery and Reception, and we're opening it up more across the school, too. In early years, it's where some of the most meaningful moments happen, but not because we've planned them that way. You might see children building a den together, figuring things out without adult input. Another child might be lying quietly, watching the sky, taking a moment to regulate.

The biggest challenge wasn't budget – it was mindset

Others return to the same spot every day, building familiarity and confidence. One child who rarely spoke during whole-class sessions started returning to the same area each day, just watching at first. Over time, that turned into single words, then short phrases, then conversations with other children completely on their terms.

For some of our quieter children, this is where their voice comes out more. There's less pressure and more reason to talk. Because children are sharing a focus – whether that's a bug, a plant or a space they've built together – conversation happens more

naturally, without the pressure of a whole-class setting.

We've also built in simple scientific enquiry. That might look like bug hunting, watering plants at the Ranger Station, or noticing what's changed since yesterday. It's not formal; it just happens as part of being out there. Older children now use the space, too – for science, wellbeing, and sometimes just a different way of learning. For them, this might include using the space to observe habitats, track weather patterns or ask simple questions about what they notice, rather than completing the same learning indoors.

WHY IT MATTERS

The impact has been hard to ignore. We're seeing children more engaged, more curious, and more willing to explore. Communication, especially for quieter children, has improved in a way that feels natural rather than pushed. For some pupils, this space has become essential for regulation. Instead of trying to manage everything in a busy classroom, they have somewhere to go that genuinely helps them reset. This isn't just something we're seeing in our setting. In places like Finland, where concrete outdoor areas have been transformed into more natural environments, there have been clear benefits for children's wellbeing, engagement and even physical health.

But you don't need a huge project to see that kind of impact. For many of our children, this is their only consistent access to this kind of environment. That makes it more than just an outdoor space; it's part of how they experience school.

START SMALL

You don't need acres of land or a big budget to create something meaningful. Start with the space you already have, even if it's small. Think about what your children need more of, not what's missing. Build it slowly. Let it change. Let the children shape it with you. Because sometimes the most powerful thing we can give children isn't more structure or more resources. It's space to breathe, explore... and just be.

5 STEPS TO CREATE YOUR OWN NEST

1 Start small. A single corner can become something powerful with the right intention.

2 Think natural, not expensive. Logs, plants and loose materials often have more impact than fixed equipment.

3 Build it into your routine. Regular access achieves more than occasional use.

4 Keep it purposeful. Link it to communication, wellbeing and enquiry, not just "being outside".

5 Let children lead. Some of the best moments will be the ones you didn't plan.



KATE TIMMS IS HEAD OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT AT FENNIES NURSERIES

Are parents always right?

*The more consumers pay, the more they expect. But how does that work in a private nursery setting? **Kate Timms** shares her thoughts...*

Having worked across higher education, independent schools and now early years for more years than I care to admit, I've seen student and parental expectations become steadily more transactional. Since the 1997 Dearing report identified students as "customers", English universities have invested heavily in marketing, branding and the student experience. Independent schools have followed a similar path, though the trigger was generational rather than financial.

Early years sits at the sharp end of this same trajectory. Families increasingly want reassurance that

they're receiving value for money. This can be challenging for providers, though – when the customer is always right, how do we stay true to what is right for the child? And can the two really meet in the middle?

DESIGNING THE PARENT EXPERIENCE

Sector commentary this year describes UK childcare as entering one of its most transformative periods, with parents becoming markedly more discerning – judging a setting on far more than safety and curriculum, right down to values, inclusivity and community feel. And because our "customers" can't yet speak for themselves, parents feel the stakes even more acutely than school or university parents do.

As leaders in early years, there's little point in hoping that things go back to the way they used to be – that ship has sailed. Our best option is to try to understand who our new demographic really is. Doing so will allow us to identify parents' concerns, communicate in ways that fit modern lives, and design systems that prevent small frustrations becoming larger problems. We need to continually communicate value in a way parents understand and build processes that are frictionless, ensuring the information they receive is accurate and consistent, whichever staff member or channel they use. None of this is glamorous, but it's what makes the difference to whether parents feel they are genuinely receiving value for the fees they pay.

Marcus Buckingham makes a similar case in his recent book *Design Love In*: the connection people feel toward an organisation isn't accidental – it's designed, built deliberately into everyday interactions and small moments. Applied to early years, that might mean the very intentional, individual feedback given to parents at the end of a busy day, or a parent survey that visibly changes what a setting does rather than being cherry-picked for marketing messages. Parents can tell the difference between a survey run to generate a score and one that's actually shaping decisions. Get the personalisation and the process right, and you've built an experience families want to stay for.

BEING PROACTIVE, NOT REACTIVE

The most effective shift I've seen work in any sector is moving from reactive to proactive: telling parents what to expect before they even have to ask. In an early years context, that might



mean explaining developmentally why your curriculum is built a certain way, or how you manage room transitions, before a parent encounters that situation and forms their own view of it. Proactive communication around the quality of your provision cuts the volume of individual queries a setting has to field, and reframes the relationship as one of expertise and partnership, rather than one of service on demand.

MANAGING DEMANDS

Every setting receives unreasonable demands sooner or later – the bespoke settling-in schedule that would unravel the whole room's routine, or a parent's view on sleep patterns.

Families want reassurance that they're receiving value for money

Research conducted by the EAB's Independent School Executive Forum offers a useful reframe: don't build your systems around the small, vocal minority of consistently dissatisfied parents. Their own estimate puts 70–75% of parents as reasonable, fair-minded people who simply want clarity and evidence that their concerns have been heard. Build policy around the loudest voices, and you risk eroding standards and goodwill for everyone else.

The real skill is distinguishing quickly between a legitimate concern expressed forcefully and a genuinely unreasonable demand, then holding a boundary with confidence once identified, grounded in sound pedagogical reasoning. That confidence needs to sit with staff as much as leadership: a key person who can explain, calmly, why a particular approach to weaning or nap transitions is in a child's best interest – rather than simply complying to avoid conflict – is worth more to a setting's culture than any policy document.

REVIEWS & AI SEARCH

Just as prospective students research universities and independent schools through league tables and social proof, parents now research nurseries almost

entirely through review platforms before they ever walk through the door. Daynurseries.co.uk alone hosts reviews for more than 15,000 UK nurseries and upwards of 250,000 parent reviews.

Layered on top is a newer shift: Answer Engine Optimisation, or AEO – how AI tools summarise and recommend a setting when a parent asks a conversational question, often without visiting a website at all. Brand and reputation now need to be legible not just to a parent reading a webpage but also to an algorithm synthesising an answer on their behalf, drawing on everything from Ofsted reports to review sentiment. Parents increasingly arrive at their first visit having already formed a view, shaped by strangers' reviews and an AI-generated summary of them – so the experience our parents have with us becomes ever more important.

FINDING THE LINE

All this talk of parent experience doesn't mean bending pedagogical standards to fit consumer expectation. It means recognising and intentionally

leaning into the notion that trust now has to be actively built and continually demonstrated, not merely assumed by virtue of professional authority. The settings that manage this best treat parents as informed partners: proactive, confident in holding boundaries, deliberate about designing the parent experience, and using feedback as insight rather than threat. Getting this balance right takes a clear understanding of what makes your setting special and being organisationally self-confident about your expertise, while also building empathy into your operating model. Parents are changing, and probably therefore so should we.



FIVE WAYS TO BUILD TRUST

1 Make communication easy – use systems that filter the noise. Don't bombard parents with too many messages; make it quick and easy for them to understand whether they need to take action or if this is a "nice-to-have" update

2 Explain the "why" before parents have to ask. Share the reasoning and your expertise behind sleep, food and outdoor time before they're challenged.

3 Design for the reasonable majority. Build your policy around the 75% of fair-minded parents, not the loudest few.

4 Use feedback to change what you do, not just score it. Parents notice when survey results are cherry-picked and genuine actions are not taken. Don't waste their time if you're not willing to change.

5 Get your online house in order. If reviews, AI summaries and word of mouth shape opinions more than ever, make sure you're giving your parents something to genuinely shout about.



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ELLE HULL IS AN EARLY YEARS TEACHER

The Early Years Matter

*Our sector needs investment and recognition – you can help ensure policymakers get the message, says **Elle Hull**...*

Walk into any nursery on a typical morning and you'll see far more than "just play". You'll see children learning how to communicate, negotiate, problem-solve, and understand themselves. You'll see educators quietly guiding emotional regulation, supporting early language, and helping children build the confidence that will shape their future learning.

It has been widely documented that early years education is one of the most specialised and impactful areas of the education system, yet it remains one of the least understood. The work requires deep knowledge of child development, safeguarding, communication, special educational needs, and behaviour support. It demands patience, emotional intelligence, and the ability to respond to dozens of individual needs at once. And still, the sector continues to battle outdated assumptions about what early years educators actually do.

For decades, the role of the nursery nurse was framed as primarily caring for children's basic needs and routines. This historical perception still shadows the profession today, despite the fact that modern early years practice is rooted in reflection, research, observation, and intentional teaching. Educators are expected to identify developmental delays, liaise with external professionals, support early communication, nurture social skills, and create environments that stimulate curiosity and learning. This is not incidental care; it's structured, purposeful education. It requires training, knowledge, and expertise, but it also requires recognition, something the sector has long been denied.

I know this from personal experience. When I qualified as an Early Years Teacher, I was frequently asked

when I would "move on" to a school, as though nursery work were a stepping stone rather than a career in its own right. Those comments revealed a wider societal misunderstanding: that early years education is somehow less professional, less skilled, or less important than teaching older children. Yet the reality could not be further from the truth.

“Passion alone cannot cover the rising costs

The consequences of this misunderstanding are felt across the workforce. The median salary for early years educators in the UK remains significantly lower than that of many other educational roles, despite the skill, responsibility and profound developmental impact the work demands. Many passionate and experienced practitioners leave the sector not because they want to, but

because they cannot afford to stay. When they go, children lose trusted relationships and the continuity that is so essential in the early years.

Yet the reality that is often overlooked

in public debate is that nurseries, however passionate their mission, are also businesses that must remain financially viable. Unlike sectors such as retail and hospitality, many nurseries have limited access to the grants and financial support that could help them weather pressures.

Dedicated nursery owners recognise these inequalities all too well. Their commitment to children, families and their communities is unwavering, but passion alone cannot cover rising costs. Every day they are forced to make impossible calculations: how to sustain high-quality provision, support and fairly reward their staff, and keep their doors open in a system that too often undervalues the essential role early education plays.

The strength of feeling across the sector is reflected in the response to the Early Years Matter campaign. At the time of writing, more than 26,000 people have already signed our petition, a clear signal that the public recognises the need for change. If we reach 100,000 signatures by 6 September the petition becomes eligible for a Parliamentary debate – that would give early years educators and the children and families who rely on them a national platform and a chance for policymakers to confront the true realities the sector faces.

This campaign is not simply about improving salaries. It's about valuing a profession that shapes children's futures long before they enter a classroom. It's about recognising the complexity of early years work and the profound impact it has on families and the lives of children. And ultimately, it's about ensuring that every child has access to confident, skilled and knowledgeable educators who can support them to thrive.

Sign the petition at tinyurl.com/TEYeymC. Follow Elle on Instagram: [@thecurioseyt](https://www.instagram.com/thecurioseyt)





LUCY FOX IS AN ASSISTANT HEADTEACHER AND EDUCATION WRITER

Laying the foundations of learning

*Don't adopt a formal approach too soon – **Lucy Fox** explains what the autumn term in Reception should actually look like...*

By the second week of September, Reception teachers often find themselves pulled in two directions. Do we stay true to what we know our children need in these first precious months, or do we bow to the pressure arriving from all angles? It can feel as though everybody is hounding you for evidence that children are “learning”, and this can tempt us into a more formal approach long before our children are ready.

The pressure is real. But in these moments we must remember that we're the experts in the room. The question isn't whether children should be learning; it's what do they need to learn first? The truth is that a successful autumn term is not one that races towards formal outcomes and adult-directed teaching but one that prioritises relationships, builds strong foundations and creates the conditions for learning that will last throughout the year and beyond.

RELATIONSHIPS BEFORE ROUTINES

One of the biggest misconceptions about the autumn term is that children need routines before anything else. What we actually know about child development is that children need a sense of safety, belonging, connection and trust before routines can become meaningful. It's true of our babies, and the idea of connection first does not diminish as our children get older. A child who does not yet feel secure in their environment, has not yet formed secure attachments and cannot yet regulate their big feelings is unlikely to benefit from a 20-minute carpet session.

Instead, care should be taken during this period of transition to form deep relationships in a way that enables children to recognise themselves in the environment. Nurturing a sense of belonging should always come first. Home visits, stay-and-play sessions, conversations with families and time spent alongside children all help relationships to form in those first few

weeks. Children learn best from adults they trust, and trust takes time to build.

In a strong Reception classroom, the autumn term should feel busy, playful and deeply relational. Playing alongside children, learning their interests, modelling language, supporting friendships and helping children develop a sense of self in the room may not produce immediate evidence, but it lays the foundations for everything that follows.

WHEN IS A CHILD READY?

Once relationships begin to form, practitioners face another challenge: deciding how quickly to move towards explicit learning experiences. The decision about whether to expect children to sit quietly and listen in their assigned carpet space becomes a continuous conversation in a Reception classroom.

If a child is struggling to stay on the carpet for five minutes, our instinct shouldn't be to expose them to more of these moments in the hope that they “catch up”. Instead, we should view that struggle as a signal that their foundations for learning are not yet secure. Genuine readiness and passive compliance are not the same thing. When we push children into formal



structures too soon, we risk leaving gaps in foundational development. Time spent at the climbing frame or play-dough table is not delaying learning. It is often what makes later success possible.

DON'T RUSH THE PRIME AREAS

Many Reception practitioners are reporting lower starting points in communication, attention and self-regulation. These changing starting points make the prime areas more important than ever. When communication, self-regulation and physical development are less secure, they cannot be treated as something to rush through before the “real” learning begins.

*Genuine readiness
and passive
compliance are not
the same thing*

Reception classrooms are intentionally noisy because they are hubs of creative thinking and problem-solving. Children take turns verbally, navigate decisions and evaluate play constantly. Practitioners should not overlook this in favour of a silent carpet session. The noise is not a distraction from learning; it is often the sound of learning itself. Children need opportunities to think aloud, negotiate, question and rehearse their ideas long before they are expected to record them independently.

HOLDING YOUR NERVE

It's hard to protect what you know children need. Standing your ground is easier said than done if there is pressure to produce written evidence. When school leaders ask to see evidence of autumn progress, there is far more to share than a piece of paper. A child who arrives unable to separate from their family and now enters independently has made progress. A child who can sustain a conversation or confidently solve a problem has made progress too.

These milestones don't always fit neatly into a tracking spreadsheet, but they matter enormously.

When talking to anxious families who want to see worksheets and documented progress, we can talk to them about their children in a way that offers them tangible experiences that show how much they have grown. We can direct stakeholders to alternative forms of evidence. Floor books, learning journeys, photographs, observations and independent choices can all provide powerful evidence of learning.

Sometimes our role is not simply to teach children, but to advocate for them. Helping leaders, colleagues and families understand the complexity of play can be vital if we want environments to remain true to what children actually need. The autumn term is not a race to prove that children are learning. It should be a period of observation, relationship-building, exploration and discovery. It is our opportunity to understand who children are, where they are starting from, and what they need next.

The pressure to accelerate will always be there. The challenge for Reception practitioners is having the confidence to recognise it, question it and, when necessary, resist it. The quality of the autumn term is not measured by how quickly children move on, but by how secure the foundations are when they do. Sometimes slowing down in September is the fastest way to help children succeed in July.



FIVE PRIORITIES

1 Relationships: Spend time getting to know families and children properly. Learning is built on trust, connection and secure relationships. These foundations take time to establish and should never be rushed.

2 Communication and language: Conversations, storytelling, singing, role-play and opportunities for children to think out loud should be prioritised. If your classroom is a hive of chatter and noise, you know you're doing something right!

3 A sense of belonging: Children should be able to enter their learning environment and see themselves reflected in it. Simple things such as placing familiar clothing in the home corner or carefully selecting the books you put out can go a long way towards helping them feel valued and seen.

4 Independence: Can children access their own resources in your environment? Do they have enough open-ended provision and resources to make informed choices for themselves? Try focusing on the small things that help children to navigate the day successfully.

5 Play: High-quality play should always be protected. Play is not a reward for learning; it is the learning. Play helps children to learn, explore, communicate, and make sense of the world around them.

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Back to basics

Start with the child, not the curriculum, and watch your learners thrive, says Tunu Yongolo...

It's Thursday morning in Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp, in 2040. At 9:00 am, 14-year-old Shufaa races through the camp's dusty streets balancing her solar tablet beneath her arm. She runs, not because there is no school but because there are too many places to learn.

As she passes the market, voices drift from small shop radios teaching multiplication songs in Kiswahili. Children sit beneath an acacia tree laughing as animated characters explain weather patterns on a community screen mounted beside the health centre. And across the road, a grandmother listens to parenting content through her phone while braiding a child's hair. Nobody here calls Kakuma a "displacement camp" any more. It's simply a town. A place where children learn. A place where education came and stayed.

Shufaa's mother used to tell her stories about the first time Ubongo arrived here, in 2026. Back then, children gathered simply to watch numbers dance across a screen. But unlike so many initiatives before it, the project remained. Television became radio, radio became community learning hubs, local teachers were trained, and children who once learned from the stories eventually began creating their own. That is the future we should be fighting for – one where learning becomes part of children's everyday lives, rather than a short-lived pilot project.

WHERE LEARNING BEGINS

When people talk about getting "back to basics" in early years, they often mean literacy, numeracy and school readiness. These things matter enormously. However, after more than a decade of creating educational content for children across Africa, including those in places where formal early learning opportunities are limited, we've learned something that may sound counterintuitive: when resources are scarce, the first thing to focus on isn't the curriculum. It's the child.

As Ubongo expanded into new communities, we discovered that before deciding what children needed to learn, we first had to understand what childhood looked like there – how they played, who cared for them, the stories they heard, the languages they spoke and the challenges they faced.

Their answers often surprised us. Some children spend more time with grandparents than teachers. Some grow up surrounded by oral storytelling rather than books. Others encounter TV, radio or mobile phones long before formal education. These realities remind us of an important truth: children don't arrive at learning as empty vessels waiting to be filled. They arrive with experiences, relationships, cultures, languages and curiosities that shape everything that follows.

UNESCO describes early childhood education as the foundation for lifelong learning, recognising children's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development as interconnected. Quality early experiences build confidence and wellbeing alongside academic learning. This is why Ubongo's approach begins with listening. Before producing new content, we spend time observing how children learn, testing stories and characters, and ensuring every idea is both developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant. Only then do we begin building educational experiences.

This process has led us to another important lesson: play isn't a reward for learning; it is learning.

Through play, children develop language, problem-solving skills, creativity, collaboration, self-regulation and confidence. Learning through play enables children to make sense of the world around them while developing foundational literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional skills.

Children rarely learn best by receiving more information. They learn best when they are engaged, curious and emotionally connected to what they are experiencing. This principle shapes everything we create, from TV and radio to digital games and classroom resources. Children who are laughing, imagining and solving problems are learning.

We've also learned that another overlooked basic is the caregiver. Caregivers are children's first teachers, yet educational systems often disregard learning that happens at home.

Co-viewing educational content encourages conversation, play and stronger relationships, reinforcing learning far beyond the classroom.

For practitioners, perhaps the most important implication is this. Whenever we feel overwhelmed by competing priorities, ambitious targets and growing expectations, it's worth returning to a simple question: What does this child need right now to thrive, not simply to perform? The answer will almost always involve relationships, play, curiosity, emotional safety and meaningful engagement. Literacy and numeracy grow more effectively when these foundations are strong.



Visit ubongo.org



TESHA MATTHEW IS THE FOUNDER OF HAPPY LITTLE HUMANS®

Calm & connected

*With a mindful morning gathering, you can help ensure all your children are ready to learn, says **Tesha Matthew**...*

Picture this. It's 8.30 am. The children come bouncing through the door, coats half on, bags trailing, voices loud, energy fizzing. They've been in the car, on the school run, rushing through breakfast. Some are excited, some anxious. Some are carrying big feelings they don't yet have the words for. And we, as early years practitioners, are standing there, ready to teach, ready to introduce new ideas, spark curiosity, and nurture little minds!

But here's the question I kept coming back to with children: are they actually ready to learn? Not just physically present but emotionally settled and calm enough to connect. Because here's what I've come to know from over a decade of working with young children: before a child can truly learn, they need to feel regulated, seen, and safe. And one of the most powerful and simple ways to offer them that is through a mindful morning gathering.

EMOTIONAL READINESS

There's a growing body of research around emotional readiness and early childhood learning, but you don't need a textbook to understand it; you see it every day. A child who arrives dysregulated, overstimulated, anxious, or overwhelmed cannot access learning in the same way as a child who feels calm and connected. Their nervous system is in survival mode. Their brain is busy managing big feelings, not exploring new ones.

When we create a moment at the start of the day that says "You're welcome here, let's breathe together, let's be still together", we're doing something profoundly important. We are co-regulating and building emotional safety – quite literally preparing their brains to learn.

And the beautiful thing? It doesn't take long, or require specialist equipment, or a perfectly quiet room. You just need intention and a little bit of magic...

MINDFUL MORNINGS

I remember the first time I introduced a mindful morning gathering with a group of EYFS and Year 1 children. They came in exactly as you might expect: lively, buzzing, full of energy. It was joyful, but it was also a lot! Rather than diving straight into the day, I asked them to sit down, close their eyes, and place both hands on their tummies (they looked slightly confused at first).

*Follow the
children's interests,
and don't be afraid
to be playful*

Then I invited them to imagine blowing up a balloon, right there in their belly. A slow breath in to fill it up, a slow breath out to let it go. And then I asked them one simple question: "What colour is your balloon?" The room shifted. I watched it happen in real time. Within just a few minutes, those lively, excitable children had moved into a place of calm. When they opened their eyes and started telling me their balloon colours – "Purple! Gold! Rainbow!" – they were present, connected and ready.

That single breathwork activity taught me more about the power of mindful mornings than any training course ever could. The simpler, the better. Always.

THE BREATHING OTTER

Another favourite that never fails to create a little moment of wonder is the Breathing Otter. I have a soft blue otter with a sparkly tummy, and I introduce it through storytelling. I tell the children that the otter has magic inside and that they have that same magic inside them too. Then I pass the otter gently around the circle. Each child holds it, takes a slow breath in and out, and feels the stillness of that moment. They love it. They lean in. They want a turn. Some children have gone home and asked their parents for a Breathing Otter of their own, which tells you everything about the impact a small, intentional object can have.

This is the heart of a mindful morning gathering: not complicated or clinical but warm, playful, and rooted in the belief that every child carries something magical within them.

TRY IT YOURSELF

You don't need a dedicated room or a perfect setup, just a consistent, welcoming space where children feel safe to settle. When it comes to breathwork, animals are your best friend. Children are immediately enchanted by the idea that a bear or a butterfly or a snake breathes just like they do. Here are five simple animal breathwork activities to try in your morning circle:

Bear Breath: Ask children to breathe in slowly through their nose like a big, sleepy bear waking up, arms stretching wide, then breathe out with a long, low rumble. Grounding, slow, and instantly calming.

Butterfly Breath: Children place their hands on their shoulders like

folded wings. Breathe in and lift the elbows up; breathe out and lower them gently back down. Light, gentle, and wonderful for anxious little ones.

Snake Breath: A deep breath in through the nose, then a long, slow ssssss out through the teeth. Children absolutely love the sound, and that extended exhale is incredibly regulating.

Bunny Breath: Three short sniffs in through the nose, then one long breath out. Quick and playful – brilliant for helping children arrive into the moment after a busy morning.

Otter Breath: Hands on tummies, eyes closed. Breathe in slowly and feel the tummy rise, imagining their sparkly inner magic growing with every breath. Breathe out and let it glow. Simple, magical, and always a favourite.

One thing worth knowing is your morning gathering doesn't have to happen sitting down. Sometimes the energy in the room calls for something a little more active. Try doing your breathwork in a standing circle instead, adding simple movements to go with each breath. Bear Breath becomes a full-body stretch. Butterfly Breath has arms sweeping up and floating down. Snake Breath comes with a slow, swaying motion from side to side. Movement and breath together are a wonderful combination; they help children arrive in their bodies as well as their minds.

And here's the secret to keeping the magic alive: themes, topics, and props. A seasonal theme (e.g. autumn leaves, winter snowflakes, spring flowers) instantly makes the gathering feel special and current. A simple prop passed around the circle (a pine cone, a feather, a smooth pebble, a soft toy) gives children something tangible to focus on and creates a little ritual they genuinely look forward to. Mix it up, follow the children's interests, and don't be afraid to be playful. When children walk through the door wondering, *What are we doing in circle time today?* you know you've got something really special.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

What surprised me most, when I began making mindful morning gatherings a regular part of the day, was how much it changed everything after the gathering too. Children who started the day with a moment of calm and connection were more settled during activities. There were fewer conflicts. Emotional vocabulary grew as children began naming their feelings more naturally, drawing on the language of the circle. The adults in the room felt it too; there was a different quality to the day when it began with intention.

A mindful morning gathering isn't just a nice addition to your routine. It's an investment in every single moment that follows.

Happy Little Humans® is a children's emotional wellbeing and mindfulness organisation. Find out more at happylittlehumansofficial.org or follow on Instagram: @happylittlehumansofficial





JAMES BODDEY IS AN EARLY YEARS CONSULTANT AND LECTURER

Nurturing bodies and minds

*Take your children into the garden this autumn and watch their learning and development flourish, says **James Boddey**...*

As the new academic year begins, September offers a valuable opportunity for early years settings to reconnect children with the natural world. Gardens, outdoor areas and local green spaces are alive with visible change – seeds are forming, leaves are falling, and the pace of nature begins to slow. These seasonal transitions provide rich, first-hand learning experiences that support children's development across all seven areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), while also promoting wellbeing, engagement and positive transitions.

For young children, autumn's changes are easy to observe and deeply meaningful. They invite curiosity, discussion and exploration, helping children make sense of the world around them. Research consistently highlights the importance of outdoor and nature-based experiences in early childhood, linking them to positive outcomes in physical development, emotional regulation, executive function and language development.

When thoughtfully planned and supported, gardening and nature-based learning can play a central role in high-quality early years provision.

Importantly, nature-based learning does not require large outdoor spaces or specialist knowledge. Even small-scale gardening, pots, planters or regular visits to local green spaces can have a significant impact. These experiences can support children in settling into new routines, forming relationships and developing essential skills across the EYFS.

WHY NATURE MATTERS IN EARLY YEARS

Outdoor environments differ from indoor spaces: they are dynamic, unpredictable and multisensory. These qualities encourage exploratory play, problem-solving and sustained shared thinking. In September, this is particularly beneficial for children transitioning into new rooms, routines or settings, as outdoor learning often feels familiar, calming and emotionally regulating.

The EYFS statutory framework emphasises the importance of children exploring, investigating and experiencing the world around them. Outdoor learning environments are uniquely placed to support this, as they are open-ended

and responsive to children's interests. Gardening activities also reflect the EYFS principle that children learn best through active engagement. Practitioners can observe children's schemas, interests and levels of involvement, enabling responsive planning and effective scaffolding.

Access to nature also supports emotional security and wellbeing, both of which underpin effective learning. Outdoor spaces can provide children with opportunities for movement, quiet reflection and sensory regulation, supporting their ability to engage positively with learning throughout the day.

A FOUNDATION FOR LEARNING

Autumn gardening may appear quieter than spring planting, but it's no less valuable. This season focuses on harvesting, observing, preparing soil and planning ahead – all of which align closely with early learning goals. Children can dig, rake and collect, strengthening gross motor skills while developing coordination and body awareness. Repetitive actions such as sweeping leaves or filling pots support focus and self-regulation.

Gardening also gives children a strong sense of purpose. Simple responsibilities such as watering, collecting seeds or clearing beds help children feel trusted and capable, supporting self-esteem and independence. Caring for shared spaces reinforces the idea that their contributions matter.

Physical development

Physical development is a prime area of the EYFS, recognising its importance in supporting children's health, independence and readiness for learning.

Gardening activities such as digging, lifting watering cans, raking and collecting leaves



offer natural opportunities to develop strength, balance and coordination.

Fine motor skills are also developed through tasks such as sorting seeds, planting, using small tools and handling natural materials. These experiences contribute to children's control and precision of movement. By modelling safe tool use and supporting children to manage appropriate risk, practitioners promote independence and self-care, as outlined in the physical development early learning goals.

Nature offers multiple entry points for learning

Communication and language

Nature provides a shared, meaningful context for communication. Children are often more verbally engaged during outdoor learning, particularly when activities are collaborative and open-ended. Gardening naturally invites discussion, questioning and explanation.

September is an ideal time to introduce new vocabulary linked to the natural world, for example, *harvest*, *roots*, *compost*, *evergreen* and *deciduous*. Practitioners can model language by narrating actions, asking open-ended questions and encouraging children to describe what they see, hear and feel. These interactions support both expressive and receptive language development.

Outdoor storytelling can also be highly effective. A garden corner, log circle or grassy area can become a space for shared stories inspired by seasonal changes, supporting listening, attention and imagination.

Understanding the world

Nature-based learning has a particularly strong connection to understanding the world. Autumn provides clear, observable examples of change, allowing children to explore concepts such as seasons, growth, decay and life cycles. Observing plants dying back, collecting seeds and preparing soil encourages early scientific thinking through observation, prediction and comparison.

Gardening also supports children's understanding of where food comes from and fosters respect for living things. Activities such as composting

and recycling garden waste introduce early ideas about sustainability and environmental responsibility. These experiences align with the EYFS expectation that children learn best through real, hands-on exploration rather than abstract instruction.

Wellbeing and emotional development

Nature-based experiences are widely recognised for their positive impact on children's emotional wellbeing. Outdoor environments can provide a calming influence, which is particularly important in September when children may experience anxiety linked to change and transition.

Gardening promotes cooperation, turn-taking and shared responsibility, supporting the development of social skills and positive relationships. Caring for plants encourages empathy and patience, while contributing to a shared space fosters a sense of belonging: *"This is our garden."*

For some children, outdoor learning reduces barriers to engagement, particularly for those who find structured indoor environments challenging. Nature offers multiple entry points for learning, supporting inclusion and allowing children to engage in ways that reflect their individual strengths and interests.

MAKING IT WORK

You don't need a dedicated garden to embed nature-based learning. Pots, planters, window boxes or regular visits to local green spaces can be just as effective. The key is to view outdoor learning as an extension of the learning environment rather than an add-on.

Practitioners should feel confident following children's interests. A fascination with worms, puddles or falling leaves can lead to meaningful learning across multiple areas of development.

By embracing nature and gardening this September, you can create engaging, meaningful experiences that support children's learning, wellbeing and connection to the world around them, laying strong foundations for the year ahead.

Read more from James at earlyinsights.co.uk



FIVE THINGS TO TRY IN SEPTEMBER

1 Create a seasonal nature table

Invite children to collect leaves, conkers, seed heads and small branches. Use the table for observation, sorting, drawing and vocabulary development.

2 Harvest and taste

Involve children in harvesting fruit, vegetables or herbs. Talk about where food comes from and link this to simple cooking or snack preparation.

3 Save seeds for spring

Collect seeds from flowers or vegetables and store them in labelled envelopes. This supports understanding of time, growth and future planning.

4 Start a compost bin

Add fallen leaves and garden waste to a compost heap or bin. This introduces concepts of recycling, decomposition and caring for the environment.

5 Plan next year's garden together

Use photos, drawings or catalogues to decide what to grow. This encourages communication, decision-making and early mathematical thinking.



DEBBY ELLEY IS AN AUTHOR AND THE CO-FOUNDER OF AUKIDS MAGAZINE

An escape from it all

*Providing a place for children with autism to go if they are feeling overstimulated is a must for every inclusive setting, says **Debby Elley**...*

Autistic minds are busy places. A 2013–2014 study by researchers from Case Western Reserve University and the University of Toronto found that, on average, autistic children's brains produce 42% more information than non-autistic ones while at rest (tinyurl.com/TEYscdAB). There's every chance, then, that an autistic youngster in your busy early years setting will at some point experience overload. This is pretty evident when they're distressed – hiding, avoiding or crying.

It's less easy to spot when there's a quiet lack of engagement (which can also be down to social communication difficulties) or they are hyper-focusing on an object. Even making a lot of their own noise can sometimes be a sign that a youngster is blocking out overwhelming stimulation.

While the staff at mainstream settings can't be expected to interpret all these behaviours without the help of an occupational therapist, entertaining the possibility of overload is a great start. Having a place to escape *before* everything gets too much is a key resource that should be available in every education setting. Some nurseries have readily available quiet areas, but not all have that luxury. Being inclusive means setting up one of your own.

Here are some hints to help you create a calm space...

1 Dark dens: This isn't about providing a make-believe play area, but a quiet zone. In this respect blackout tents (sometimes known as dark dens) are useful.

2 Ensure safety: Tents can get stuffy and warm – keep it aired (i.e. its windows open) and sit with the child or just outside the tent; have them visible.

3 Prevention, not cure: Don't wait for a child to experience

overwhelm; give them the chance to use the space at regular intervals. Never force its use, but let them know it's available.

4 Name it wisely: Be clear this isn't a play tent, and neither should it ever be used as a form of punishment – nursery managers need to be especially clear to staff about this. Its use needs to be driven by the needs of the autistic child, not the adult. Call it the Quiet Tent. Stick to soft cushions, weighted items and calming sensory objects. Avoid using turn-taking language that makes it sound like a toy.

5 Explaining to the other children: Ask the other children if they would be allowed to play with a guide dog. No, that's for people who need it to help them get around! In the same way, the calm tent is for children whose brains are especially busy and need quiet and calm every so often, so that they can think clearly.

6 Build it into learning: Talk openly about what feeling overwhelmed is like and why some bodies need more quiet in order to feel better. A good way of explaining it is to use two

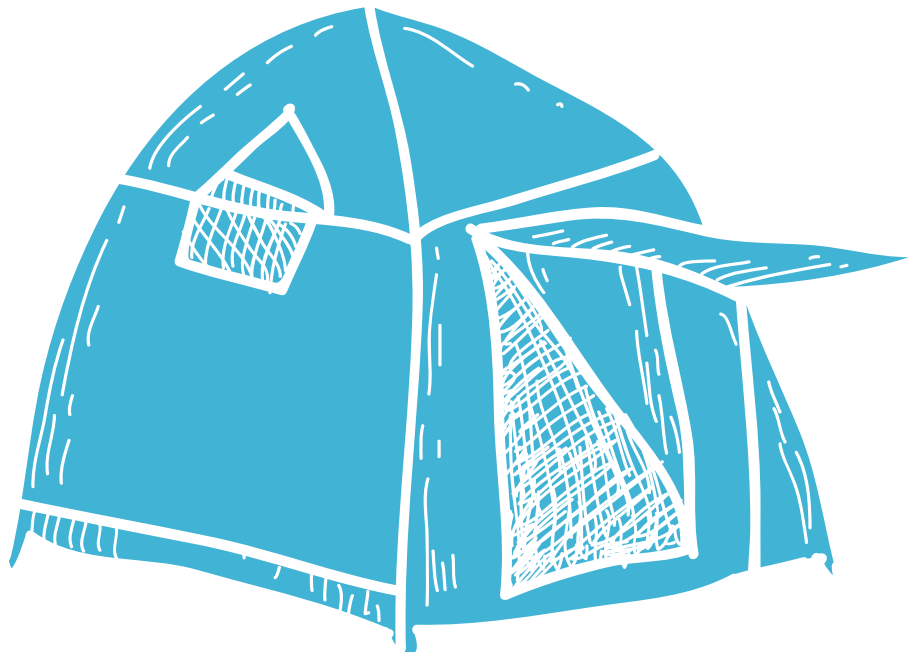
bottles – one full of water and one full of lemonade. Show the children that the lemonade (brain that works differently) is fizzy; it's busy all the time, and when shaken up (with lots of things to do) it takes a while to calm down. The water bottle (non-autistic brain) isn't so fizzy, and after being shaken it calms down quickly.

7 Guided access only: Make a rule that a grown-up will help you decide if the calm tent is the right place – always. No exceptions. Use picture signs to indicate: "Calm tent only" / "Ask a grown-up"

8 Alternative options: If the tent is the only calm space, it's too exciting to resist. Balance it with other quiet corners, with soft seating and beanbags, books, headphones or a cosy mat space for other children.

9 Positioning: Finally, make sure you place the quiet area or tent away from the main foot traffic, so it doesn't become connected to the rest of the classroom activities.

Debby provides autism training to early years settings – visit aukids.co.uk



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EMMA DAVIS IS A SENIOR LECTURER IN EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITY COLLEGE BIRMINGHAM

Training tomorrow's practitioners

Emma Davis shares what today's Early Childhood Studies students are learning – and the skills they'll soon be bringing into settings...

This year our Early Childhood Studies students at University College Birmingham have covered an unusually wide range of ground.

All experiences, opportunities and learning link to their modules of study but also develop wider skills required as graduate practitioners. Students need the theory from lectures and wider reading, but their knowledge is also informed through placement experiences, with them completing at least 200 hours per year.

STARTING OUT

Our Level 4 students have had a jam-packed start to their university experience, with preparation for placement from our Employability Tutors, an introduction to the Graduate Practitioner Competencies (GPCs) and learning from a range of modules, including The Child in Society, Equality, Diversity and Inclusive Play and

Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development. A highlight was a day with Amanda Burton Smith from the Froebel Trust, whose interactive session offered an introduction to the pioneer whose ideas still shape practice a century on. Linked to Nurturing Children's Health and Wellbeing, a session with Teresa Johnson from Startwell highlighted to students the importance of healthy eating and physical activity and discussed the role of early years practitioners in promoting healthy lifestyle habits.

It wasn't all about theory for this cohort, as we also value the personal, social and emotional aspects of learning, just like in early years. Students organised an Eid celebration, which was a time of connection where students and teaching staff came together to enjoy homemade treats and to listen to stories of how they mark the occasion.

SKILLS FOR SUCCESS

Level 5 students put their placement experiences into practice by working on an exciting project with Cosy Direct. They were tasked with creating a new resource, bringing together their knowledge of child development, inclusive practice and theory. As part of their Skills for Success development, they also took a trip to Thinktank Birmingham to look at how museums and public learning spaces support

CASE STUDY:

Placement, Level 4 – Sidra Khan

"Walking into my placement for the first time, I felt a mixture of excitement and nerves. Moving to a new country meant I was also adapting to a different curriculum, a new setting, and children I had never met. I wasn't sure what to expect, but the experience quickly became far more rewarding than I had imagined.

"One moment that has stayed with me was meeting a little boy who cried every morning and clung to his parents. I soon realised that before children can learn, they need to feel safe, secure, and valued. Through patience, consistency, and gentle reassurance, I watched him gradually build trust. Seeing him happily wave goodbye to his parents and confidently join his friends reminded me of the importance of strong relationships in early years education.

"This placement has increased my confidence, communication skills, and ability to build positive relationships with children and families."





children's curiosity and communication, and practised carrying out risk assessments. Students came back talking about pathways they hadn't considered before (museum education, outreach teaching and community learning roles), evidence of how these experiences can reshape how a student sees their future.

We value the personal, social and emotional aspects of learning

PREPARING TO PRACTISE

A highlight for the Level 6 students was visiting Pedmore C of E Primary School in Stourbridge for a forest school day, run through Fruits of the Forest. They learned the history of forest school, its influence on children's holistic development, and how to manage risky play. Activities included hapazome, clay play, bug hunting, music making and outdoor role play, plus cooking lunch on the fire and practising mindful meditation. Students left with ideas they can use directly in placement.

One of the richest sessions of the year came out of a question posed in an Enhancing Employability seminar: Do accents matter? The discussion followed a piece by Alexander Baratta on accent expectations in British teacher training, with students thinking about identity, what it means to hear

your own voice reflected back in a classroom and whether a Brummie accent means the same thing in 2026 that it did a generation ago. They asked whether the responsibility for being understood sits with the speaker or the listener, and applied the same question to children, who arrive in our settings already hearing a wide range of accents. I've taught for a long time and it's rare to hear a group think that carefully together, in real time, changing their minds as they listened to each other. I've suggested some ways you might explore this yourself in the panel to the right.

Level 6 students also welcomed Sean Delaney from CREC, who spoke about initial teacher training routes, and met Verity Campbell-Barr when she visited for the ECSDN AGM. Talking with them directly gave students a real sense of the research and policy world their degree connects to.

Across all levels, students attended the launch of the second edition of *Birth to Five Matters*, completed their 200 placement hours, and took part in Makaton training. Dissertations were underway for our final-year students throughout, alongside the usual end-of-year celebrations that all cohorts deserved after a demanding year.

CASE STUDY:

Makaton training, Level 6 – Nawal Mohamed

"During the session, I practised basic signs, facial expressions, and everyday phrases that make communication easier to understand in everyday situations. What stood out most was the emphasis on patience, repetition, and the importance of visual aids alongside speech. It challenged my assumptions about communication, as it does not always depend on words. After the session, I reflected on how often everyday conversations can leave out those who communicate in different ways, without us realising it."

IN PRACTICE: EXPLORING ACCENTS

Run a reflective discussion:

Make time in a staff meeting to talk honestly about accents: your own and each other's in the team. Consider the assumptions that are made about intelligence, competence or background based on someone's accent, and whether those assumptions influence how staff are treated or how children are spoken to.

Notice accents without

correcting them: When a child comments on how someone says a word, respond with interest rather than correction. "You say that differently to me, how interesting" keeps the moment open rather than shutting it down as a mistake.

Read aloud in a range of voices:

Bring stories to life with different accents. This is important in enabling children to hear different ways of saying words which are representative of our society.

Invite families to record a story:

Invite a parent or grandparent to record a favourite story in their own accent, then play it back in the setting. Children hear directly that their family's way of speaking is also welcome and valued in the setting.

Separate support from

correction: If a child needs help with a new word, model it clearly. If they're simply pronouncing it in their own accent, that isn't something we try to fix, as it's just as important for them to know words can be said in different ways.

Reflect on your own voice:

Notice whether you change how you speak in front of parents, inspectors, or managers, and ask why. Modelling comfort with your own accent gives children permission to keep theirs.



LUCKY KHERA IS LEAD EARLY YEARS ADVISER AT HFL EDUCATION

How to inspire confident writers

Lucky Khera suggests ways in which practitioners can support mark making in an increasingly digital world...

Writing is an indicator for success for children throughout their schooling and beyond, so it's imperative they master the foundational skills needed to become a confident writer in early years. However, we still have some way to go to ensure *all* children have those skills secured by the end of Reception.

Writing is currently the lowest-scoring metric of all learning goals in the early years assessment. In 2024/25 just 71.8% of children hit the expected level (tinyurl.com/TEYwrst). While there have been incremental improvements over time, there remains a clear lag compared to other areas of learning.

One of the biggest challenges we face in improving children's writing is the growing influence of technology. For many children, life in a digital world looks very different to the skills we're asking them to learn – and the gap is widening. As early years practitioners, we must bridge the divide and make positive changes that help children discover the joy of mark making, creativity and early writing.

SETTING THE FOUNDATIONS

World Health Organisation and government guidance (tinyurl.com/TEYsrt) advises a one-hour daily screen-time limit for children aged two to five years, and avoiding screen time altogether for younger children (other than for shared activities). In reality, many children have far more screen time than recommended, leading to fewer opportunities to build the physical dexterity, strength and coordination needed for mark making and early writing.

Tapping, swiping, pinching and zooming on a screen offers some practise in fine-motor control and hand-eye coordination, but it's no replacement for real, hands-on experiences.

To develop the muscle strength, stability and control needed to hold and guide writing tools, children need opportunities to manipulate objects, grasp, squeeze, twist, build, and explore with their hands.

Make a positive change: Wrapping elastic bands around a cork, bending wire into shapes, using tweezers to pick up small objects, twisting using screwdrivers, slotting keys into padlocks, or balancing marbles on golf tees are all playful, hands-on activities you can do with everyday objects that build the same fine-motor strength and control required for early writing.

SPARKING THEIR IMAGINATION

The children most eager to begin their writing journey are often those inspired to express something that interests them. Whether it's animals, dinosaurs, cars or another passion, the chance to talk about what they love gives them a powerful motivation to communicate.



But for children to have something they're excited to share, they first need rich experiences to draw from. Swapping watching programmes or videos with little educational value for a varied diet of books, real-life experiences, role play, and small-world play all help to fire imaginations and give children ideas they can't wait to talk about.

Children need rich experiences to draw from

Make a positive change:

Understanding the cultural capital of your cohort gives you valuable insight into which children may need more real-life experiences to spark their imagination. New experiences might come from within your setting (e.g. exploring different cultural traditions, tasting new foods or listening to world music), or from outside (e.g. visiting the local park or library). Broadening children's experiences broadens their ideas, language, and their motivation to write.

MODELLING WRITING

Research suggests only 15% of adults use writing on a daily basis (tinyurl.com/TEYygvw). With smartphones, tablets and computers making it quick and convenient to write notes, messages, lists and cards, many adults rarely pick up a pen.

For children, this means fewer opportunities to see adults modelling writing at home. They don't see how people hold a pen, move their hand or the marks made on the paper. Without these everyday experiences, it becomes harder to spark children's curiosity about writing or inspire them to imitate what they see.

Make a positive change: Bring writing into children's play when joining in with scenarios they love – for example,

jotting down food orders and adding dishes to the menu board in the outdoor kitchen. When children see writing woven into the play they already enjoy, it feels meaningful, fun and connected to their interests.

PRINT VS HANDWRITTEN TEXT

As adults write less often, children also get fewer chances to see handwritten letters and numbers in everyday life. At home, they might still see writing in greetings cards, on a family planner or a handwritten shopping list. But in the outside world, most of what they see is printed: shop signs, café menus, posters and labels. Even in early years settings, many resources feature printed words rather than handwritten ones.

Printed text is incredibly useful for supporting letter recognition and early reading because the letters are clear and consistent. However, it doesn't show children what *their* own writing might look like. Without exposure to natural, handwritten forms, children miss the chance to understand how letters vary when people write them and why their own writing doesn't have to be perfectly uniform.

Make a positive change: Find a balance of handwritten and printed labels. Invite children to talk about their creations in their own words and scribe their descriptions for them. This creates more handwritten examples around your setting, and shows children their ideas, voice and contributions matter.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Technology may be reshaping the world around us, but writing remains a vital skill that unlocks children's access to learning and empowers them throughout their education. By being intentional in our practice and working alongside parents and caregivers to gently *un-digitalise* children's environments, we can create the rich, hands-on experiences they need and help every child grow into a confident mark maker and an enthusiastic young writer.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE MARK MAKING

Make it meaningful: When writing opportunities feel purposeful and link to children's interests, motivation to write grows naturally.

Celebrate writing: Display children's mark making to value and celebrate their journey towards becoming writers.

Offer a rich variety of tools: Inspire children with a range of writing materials, as novelty can spark curiosity.

Incorporate movement and large-scale marks: Brushes, rollers, mops, water or sticks in mud can facilitate large movements to help develop gross motor skills.

Model mark making: When children see practitioners drawing, annotating, or writing for real purposes, it shows mark making is meaningful and valued.

Use Pupil Premium effectively: Consider purchasing resources for children to take home, ensuring their enthusiasm for mark making continues beyond the school day.

Engage parents and carers: Encourage them to give children everyday tasks, such as pegging out washing, kneading dough or twisting bottle lids, to support their development.

Use favourite characters as prompts: You can't compete with Bluey, but you can use characters to spark creativity: *Where will Bluey go on holiday? What will she do? Shall we design a postcard she might send home?*

Be patient: Children's hands are still developing up to KS1, so holding writing tools may feel uncomfortable. Gentle encouragement and time to build physical strength are key.



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Adam Jones	10/01/2010	4	M	£11,100	15	Non-Funding Children
Adam Jones	10/01/2010	4	M	£11,100	15	Non-Funding Children
Adam Jones	10/01/2010	4	M	£11,100	15	Non-Funding Children
Adam Jones	10/01/2010	4	M	£11,100	15	Non-Funding Children
Adam Jones	10/01/2010	4	M	£11,100	15	Non-Funding Children
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BETH DOWNIE IS A REGISTERED NUTRITIONIST

Boost fibre without battles

*This overlooked nutrient has big benefits for young children, explains **Beth Downie**...*

One of the most important nutrients for growing children is frequently overlooked: fibre. Despite its many health benefits, most children (and adults) in the UK aren't eating enough. The good news is that increasing fibre intake doesn't require expensive superfoods or complicated recipes. In fact, a few simple "top, add and swap" changes can make a significant difference.

WHY IS FIBRE IMPORTANT?

Fibre is found naturally in plant foods, including fruit, vegetables, beans, pulses, wholegrains, nuts, and seeds. Unlike other carbohydrates, fibre isn't digested in the small intestine because our bodies don't have the enzymes needed to break it down.

There are two main types of fibre, and both play a key role. Soluble fibre absorbs water to form a gel-like substance in the gut, helping to support healthy digestion and regulate blood sugar levels. Insoluble fibre adds bulk to stools, helping food move through the digestive system and reducing the risk of constipation.

A diet rich in fibre also supports a healthy gut microbiome by feeding the beneficial bacteria that live in the digestive system. These bacteria play a vital role in overall health, and research suggests that establishing a healthy gut from an early age may have lasting benefits. Eating enough fibre throughout life has also been linked with a lower risk of developing conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers.

The recommended fibre intake is 30g per day for adults and 20g per day for primary school-aged children. However, in the UK only around 14% of children and 4% of adults meet these recommendations, highlighting

just how important it is to encourage fibre-rich foods from an early age.

FIBRE FOR THE UNDER-FIVES

Children aged 0–5 years have different nutritional needs from older children and adults. Once solid foods are introduced from around six months, it's helpful to gradually offer a wide variety of naturally fibre-rich foods alongside milk feeds. Rather than focusing too closely on specific guideline amounts, parents, carers, and early years settings should aim to provide a balanced diet that includes plenty of fruit, vegetables, beans, lentils and wholegrain foods appropriate to each child's age and stage of development.

Food fussiness is a normal part of child development

As children grow into toddlers and preschoolers, these foods help support healthy digestion while introducing them to different flavours, colours and textures. Encouraging variety during the early years can help lay the foundations for healthy eating habits that last a lifetime.

Good fibre-rich foods for children under five include:

- Soft fruit, e.g. pears, peaches, berries and bananas
- Cooked vegetables, including carrots, peas, broccoli and sweet potato
- Oats and porridge
- Wholemeal toast or pitta fingers
- Beans, lentils and chickpeas
- Wholegrain cereals with no added sugar
- Baked potatoes with the skin on (for older toddlers)

Remember that young children have small stomachs, so very high-fibre diets can fill them up before they've eaten enough energy and nutrients. The aim is balance, not simply adding as much fibre as possible.

WHY CAN FUSSY EATERS MISS OUT?

Many preschoolers go through a phase of food refusal. It can be frustrating when favourite foods suddenly become unacceptable, particularly if vegetables seem to disappear from the menu overnight.

The reassuring news is that food fussiness is a normal part of child development. Young children are naturally cautious about unfamiliar foods, and it often takes



repeated exposure – sometimes 10–20 occasions or more – before they're willing to taste something new. The key is to avoid pressure. Encouraging children to explore foods through play, cooking and repeated opportunities to see them on the plate can gradually increase acceptance over time.

THREE WAYS TO UP FIBRE INTAKE

1 Top it

Adding fibre to foods children already enjoy is often the easiest place to start. Try topping:

- Porridge with berries or sliced banana
- Yoghurt with chopped fruit
- Breakfast cereal with grated apple
- Toast with mashed banana (instead of jam/honey/chocolate spread)

These small additions can quickly increase fibre while keeping familiar meals appealing.

2 Add it

Look for opportunities to add vegetables, beans or pulses into family favourites. For example:

- Stir lentils into spaghetti bolognese; include beans in soups and casseroles
- Add grated carrots or courgettes to pasta sauces

- Blend beans or chickpeas into homemade dips
- Use colourful vegetables to make an “Eat a Rainbow” stir-fry

Children often accept these ingredients more readily when they are part of meals they already know and enjoy.

3 Swap it

Simple swaps can significantly increase fibre intake without changing the overall meal. Swap:

- Refined white grains for wholegrains (wholegrain breakfast cereal, wholemeal pasta, rice and bread)
- Try replacing some, or all, of the meat protein in dishes such as bolognese, chilli or curry with plant proteins (chickpeas, lentils, beans)

Introducing swaps gradually (e.g. by mixing white and wholemeal pasta) can help children adjust more easily.

MAKE FRUIT & VEG FUN!

Young children eat with their eyes first. Instead of asking them to eat “their vegetables”, try making food more playful:

- Create colourful rainbow snack plates
- Cut fruit into fun shapes
- Offer vegetables with dips, e.g. hummus
- Build funny faces using fruit and salad

Getting children involved in preparing food is one of the best ways to encourage healthy eating. Depending on their age, preschoolers can:

- Wash fruit and vegetables
- Stir ingredients
- Sprinkle oats or seeds
- Mash beans

These simple activities build confidence around food and encourage curiosity about trying new ingredients.

And remember: parents and carers are powerful role models. Seeing trusted adults eat and enjoy a wide variety of healthy, fibre-rich foods encourages children to become more familiar with these foods and increases the likelihood that they will be willing to try them too.

DON'T FORGET DRINKS!

As fibre intake increases, so should fluid intake. Water is the best drink for young children throughout the day, helping fibre move comfortably through the digestive system and supporting healthy bowel habits.

PROGRESS, NOT PERFECTION

Many parents worry when their child goes through a fussy-eating phase. The reassuring news is that healthy eating is about what children eat over time, rather than at every single meal. Small, consistent changes are much more effective than trying to overhaul a child's diet overnight.

Beth has experience across the food industry, as well as in public health and community nutrition and wellbeing, and is a consultant nutritionist to Purely Nutrition and the PhunkyFoods programme. Visit purelynutrition.com

RECIPE IDEA: OVERNIGHT OATS

- Overnight oats are a simple, nutritious breakfast that's easy to prepare ahead of time and perfect for getting children involved in the kitchen.
- Prepare them the night before, then enjoy them cold or, if preferred, add a splash of milk and warm in the microwave for 30–60 seconds.
- The flavour combinations are endless, but some of our favourites include Very Berry, Carrot Cake, and Apple & Raisin Overnight Oats. Find the recipes at tinyurl.com/TEYovoPH
- Adding fruit or vegetables to overnight oats is an easy way to boost fibre while naturally sweetening breakfast, reducing the need for added sugar or honey.





SANDRA BEALE IS A BBC STEM FREELANCER, AUTHOR, AND EDUCATOR

Growing rainbows

Sandra Beale shares a hands-on way to explore colour and develop early scientific thinking...

Growing rainbows is a beautiful and simple STEM activity that invites children to explore how colours travel and grow.

Using kitchen roll, non-permanent marker pens and water, children can watch a rainbow “grow” across the paper as colour moves through the fibres. It’s low-cost, visually striking, and extremely easy for settings to replicate – making it ideal for both small-group exploration and whole-class investigations. The results photograph wonderfully, providing rich opportunities for learning journals, displays and parent communication.

This activity also supports early scientific thinking by encouraging children to observe closely, make predictions, describe changes and revisit ideas. It is a gentle introduction to scientific enquiry and helps children develop curiosity, confidence and language around everyday materials.

INTRODUCE THE EXPERIMENT

Begin by gathering the children together and inviting them to share what they already know about rainbows. Encourage them to describe the colours they can see, where they have spotted a rainbow before, and what they think might make a rainbow appear. This activates prior knowledge and gives you a sense of their understanding.

You can explain that rainbows often appear in the sky shortly after it has rained and the sun comes out. When sunlight shines through tiny drops of water in the air, the light bends and separates into different colours, creating the rainbow effect. This links beautifully to early ideas about light and weather.

If you are outdoors, you might demonstrate this by turning on a garden hose in bright sunlight. As the fine mist catches the light, children can often spot a small rainbow forming – a magical moment that helps them

connect real-world experience with the investigation. Alternatively, you could share a picture book about rainbows to build context and vocabulary before beginning. Books offer a gentle way to introduce scientific ideas, and they support children who may not have seen a rainbow recently or who benefit from visual prompts.

Afterwards, explain to the children that today they are going to *grow their own rainbow* using kitchen roll, water and colour. Framing the activity in this way builds excitement and anticipation. Children love the idea of making something “come to life”, and the promise of watching colours travel and blend gives them a clear purpose for the investigation. This simple introduction sets the stage for meaningful exploration and helps children feel ready and motivated to begin.

WHAT YOU NEED

- Kitchen roll
- Deep tray (e.g. a baking tray or similar)
- Non-permanent marker pens in different colours

All materials are inexpensive, safe and easy to source, making this ideal for busy early years settings.

WHAT TO DO

- **Prepare the group.** Ask the children to sit or stand around a table before you begin and ensure you have a few helpers available to support the activity. This creates a calm, organised space where everyone in the group can see the investigation clearly.
- **Give each child a sheet of kitchen roll.** Tear off individual sheets and hand one to each child so everyone can work independently.
- **Invite children to add colour.** Ask them to colour the bottom section of their kitchen roll in bold blocks of different colours. Encourage them to choose contrasting shades so the rainbow effect is easy to see.
- **Dip and observe.** Support children to gently dip the coloured end of their sheet into a tray of water. As the water begins to travel upwards, they can watch the colours “grow” or get pulled along the fibres of the paper.



NEW VOCABULARY

- **Capillary action** – how water travels through tiny spaces in materials like paper.
- **Growing** – getting bigger or spreading out, just like the colours in the rainbow.
- **Fibres** – the tiny threads that make up kitchen roll and help water move through it.
- **Non-permanent marker pens** – pens whose ink dissolves in water, allowing colours to travel.

THE SCIENCE

This investigation introduces key scientific ideas in a playful, accessible way: absorption – children can see how dry kitchen roll soaks up water like a sponge; and capillary action – the way water travels upwards through tiny fibres in the paper, carrying colour with it.

These concepts support early scientific thinking and encourage children to make observations and predictions.

EYFS LEARNING LINKS

- **Understanding the world:** *observing changes, exploring materials, noticing patterns*
- **Communication & language:** *describing processes, using comparative language*
- **Expressive arts & design:** *exploring colour, pattern and visual effects*
- **Physical development:** *fine motor control through placing and handling materials*



- **Characteristics of Effective Learning:** *curiosity, exploration, sustained thinking*

TAKING IT FURTHER

- **Explore water temperature** and observe whether warm or cold water affects the speed at which the children's rainbows grow.
- **Compare absorption** using different materials such as tissue paper, A4 paper or thin cardboard squares.
- **Introduce simple vocabulary**

including *absorb, travel, mix* and *change* to support early scientific language.

- **Invite children to make predictions** such as “Which colour will reach the middle first?” to encourage reasoning and curiosity.



Sandra is the founder of Toddler and Early Years STEM. Visit [youtube.com/@SandraBealeToddlerSTEM](https://www.youtube.com/@SandraBealeToddlerSTEM)

FIVE MORE ACTIVITIES TO TRY

These colourful STEM investigations are great fun but can be extremely messy, so it's important to have plenty of kitchen roll (or even a mop) on hand to wipe up spills and drips. Each activity encourages exploration, prediction and hands-on learning, offering practitioners quick ways to extend children's scientific thinking.

Soap foam ice cream – A sensory, bubbly exploration of texture and colour using washing-up liquid, a whisk and food colouring. Give the children bowls, scoops and spoons so they can play with the foam, mix colours and let their imagination take over. This activity supports fine motor skills, imaginative play and descriptive language.

Fizzy paint – Combining bicarbonate of soda and vinegar for colourful chemical reactions. Invite children to draw a picture, then paint it using a mixture of paint and bicarbonate of soda. Using a pipette, they can squirt vinegar onto their artwork and watch it fizz and bubble. This encourages prediction, observation and early understanding of reactions.

Self-inflating balloons – Watching gas production create movement. This magical experiment allows children to see a balloon inflate “all by itself”. Fill a balloon halfway with bicarbonate of soda and place it over the mouth of a plastic bottle



containing a small amount of vinegar. When the bicarbonate drops into the vinegar, gas is produced and the balloon inflates. Children love watching the reaction unfold.

Volcano eruptions – A classic, high-impact colour-mixing reaction. This experiment becomes even more exciting when you add food colouring and a squirt of washing-up liquid to create a frothy, colourful eruption. Children can compare how different colours mix and how quickly the reaction takes place.

Growing colourful ice towers – Melting, dripping and colour blending with frozen blocks. Freeze coloured water to create bright ice blocks that children can paint with, drip warm water onto, or build into towers. As the ice melts, colours travel through cracks and channels, offering rich opportunities for observation and discussion about change over time.

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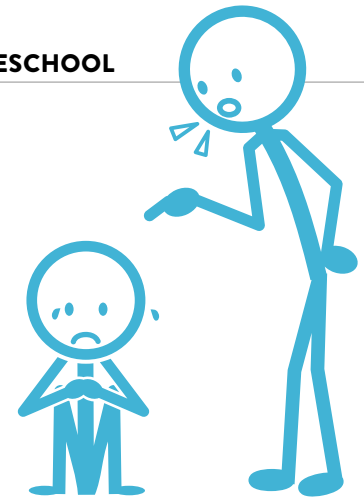
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OLIVER RIDDETT IS THE OWNER OF CHILDREN OF TOWAN PRESCHOOL

“Behaviour management isn’t working”



Oliver Riddett explains why – and what early years practitioners should try instead...

Behaviour management remains a pressure across the sector. It’s not failing because practitioners are uncaring or unskilled – most understand attachment and co-regulation, and that behaviour is communication. So perhaps the problem isn’t that we need better ways to control behaviour, but a clearer way to understand the patterns beneath it.

Children’s development is full of opposites: movement and stillness, relationship and independence, imagination and order, freedom and structure, exploration and construction. Neither side is inherently better. A healthy child learns to move between them, not remaining calmly in the middle but rather developing access to both sides.

A child may be social and attuned to others. We might recognise the Friend: belonging, attachment and harmony. But if that child cannot tolerate solitude, act independently or risk disagreement, their relational strength may begin to restrict them. Another child may become absorbed in imaginary worlds. The Imagineer brings originality and possibility. But imagination also needs a pathway into form. Can the child plan, build or bring an idea into the shared world? Without that counterweight, imagination can become escape rather than creative power.

The same is true of movement. The Mover may learn through climbing, carrying and physical experimentation. Movement is not automatically dysregulation. It may be how a child gathers attention and finds themselves in the room. But can they also pause, watch and receive?

Rather than asking only, “What is this behaviour communicating?”, we can ask, “What pattern is strongly present,

and what balancing capacity is less available?”

For example, a child who constantly disrupts may have a strong Joker: playful, socially alert, releasing tension. The aim is not to remove humour, but to help them discover when play connects people and when it protects them from discomfort or shame. A child who opposes every instruction may be developing the Rebel: autonomy, truth and the courage to resist. The

Children’s development is full of opposites

answer isn’t to crush resistance but to balance personal power with cooperation and awareness of others. A child who explores constantly may appear scattered or unable to finish. Yet exploration is vital. The question is whether the Explorer can also call upon the Builder: staying with materials, shaping discoveries and completing something meaningful.

Behaviour isn’t divided into good and bad. It’s human potential that may have become exaggerated, unsupported or separated from its balancing counterpart.

BALANCING EXPERIENCES

This doesn’t mean every behaviour should be accepted. Children need adults who hold reliable boundaries. But boundaries are more effective when we understand which capacity the child is trying to develop – and which balancing experience we need to provide.

A child lost in movement may need a purposeful physical task before being invited into stillness. A child clinging to

adults may need reassurance alongside steps towards independence. A child controlling every detail may need dependable structure, followed by opportunities to tolerate uncertainty. A child immersed in fantasy may need real tools and materials to turn imagination into construction.

This is why repeated behaviour strategies often fail. We intervene at the point of disruption, the child settles temporarily, and the same pattern returns. The behaviour has been interrupted, but the underlying imbalance has not changed.

The alternative isn’t another reward chart, script or calming technique. It’s a more disciplined form of observation. We look for the child’s strengths, recurring patterns and natural ways of meeting the world. We notice which qualities are abundant and which remain difficult to access. We then adjust relationships, environments and experiences so the child can develop greater range.

When staff begin to see children in this way, practice changes. Planning becomes more purposeful. Conversations with parents become less judgemental. Intervention happens earlier, before a pattern hardens into a problem. Perhaps behaviour management isn’t working because it begins with the question, “How do we stop this?” A more developmental question is: “What is present, what is missing, and how can we help this child find balance?”

Children don’t need their strongest qualities suppressed. They need adults who can recognise those qualities, provide their counterweight and help them grow towards wholeness.

Oliver is the founder of The Archetype Approach, an observational framework for understanding child development. He delivers practitioner training focused on child development, behaviour and early intervention. Visit archetype-approach.co.uk



KAYTE COOLING-SMITH IS A MULTI-AWARD-WINNING CHILDMINDER BASED IN ESSEX

Creativity as communication

Kayte Cooling-Smith explores the hidden power of expressive arts and design...

Over recent years, there has been a clear shift in how we view expressive arts and design (EAD) in the early years, and a growing realisation that in many cases, the value for children is in the creative process rather than a perfect finished product. It's no longer common to see a wall of 30 identical paper-bag owls or a washing line of hand-print bunnies crossing the room, and rightfully so. These adult-directed activities give children the opportunity to be artistic, develop physical skills and demonstrate some loose understanding, but they hugely restrict their creativity and limit the opportunities they need to be uniquely expressive.

Increasingly now, we see settings with a more open approach – one where children are free to create with no expected outcome and with access to a wider variety of creative resources as part of continuous provision. The end-goal is no longer a practitioner-manipulated bunny, sent home to delight parents; instead bags are filled with random pieces of cut-up paper, a button glued to a lolly stick, an egg box covered in googly eyes, and a painting of a boat – only identifiable as one prior to the child covering the whole page in thick brown paint. A few years ago, we might have whipped that away before the child “ruined it”.

Each of these handmade treasures very much celebrates a child-centred approach to EAD, and children's outcomes are most certainly improved because of it.

STRIKING A BALANCE

We've also seen positive changes in the way we talk to children about their work. Instead of narrow questions such as “What is it?”, we ask, “How did you make that?” Instead of broad comments such as “Well done!”,

we make thoughtful reflections such as “I love how you've blended the yellow into the green.” This shift in communication shows children that we value how they are being creative and the skills they've used, without putting pressure on them to give their work meaning.

And this is where we must be careful that we haven't shifted the balance too far in the other direction – we've rightly moved away from judging the outcomes of children's work, but in doing so, have we now become hesitant to interpret it? We ask, “How did you make that?” because we don't want to impose adult meaning, which is good practice. But after the child implicitly or explicitly tells us what it is, or shows us through expression, it's okay to be curious about what that representation reveals.

Back in the days of the perfect hand-print bunnies, it was easy to say that the product had no value or discernible meaning to the child because, fundamentally, it was an adult-conceived, adult-directed, adult-manipulated hand-print bunny – the hand-print being the only element the child took any part in. But now our children have agency over their work and these moments where they are role-playing imaginatively with sticks, producing elaborate constructions with blocks, modelling with clay, and glueing googly eyes all over egg boxes offer us the perfect opportunity to learn more about them.

We can easily identify the learning



outcomes in their work – the hand-eye coordination of the glue on the lolly stick, the pre-writing skills used to manipulate the clay, and the problem-solving and mathematical thinking used to carefully place the blocks. But by focusing so intently on the *how*, and not so much on the *what* and the *why*, we have unwittingly restricted our own understanding of who our children are and what they are trying to tell us about themselves.

So, let's see what we missed...

That carefully constructed block play? That was a bridge, but it wasn't just any old bridge. It was a reconstruction of the bridge this little one drove over on his way to visit his grandparents in Wales – they all stayed in a tent for the weekend and learnt a

Welsh song around the campfire. He was singing “Mr Hapus Ydw I” (“Mr Happy I am”) while he played with the blocks. This was his first tangible representation of his Welsh heritage.

The button on the lolly stick? That was a dentist mirror – the one the dentist uses to look inside your mouth and check your teeth. This child’s mummy is a dentist, and they went to work with her the other day.

The picture of the boat covered in brown paint? Well, we know that this child loves to cover their hands and arms in paint too, and so this is another example of schematic play – it’s their birthday next week, so we could offer an invitation to wrap presents linked to their enveloping schema.

And what about the egg box with the googly eyes? Well, at first this child just really enjoyed sticking the eyes to the box and counting how many they could fit on, but then they realised it looked like the eyes of the spider they



were a little afraid of in the nature book, and now it’s more than just an egg box with eight googly eyes stuck on – it’s a tarantula, and this child isn’t afraid of it any more.

NEW UNDERSTANDING

And there we have it – taking time to be gently curious about what children have produced shows how they often weave together mathematics, language, scientific thinking, personal experiences, memories, ideas and emotions into their creative play, giving us as practitioners a much deeper understanding of who each child is.

When we notice that both the process of being expressive and the finished creative product are a representation, EAD becomes far more than just another area of the curriculum and evidence of creativity; it becomes evidence of thinking and the rich interconnectedness of children’s learning.

So, the next time a child proudly hands you an egg box covered in googly eyes, resist the urge to simply admire the glueing skills or praise their creativity. Instead, pause and wonder, what story is this child telling? What memory are they revisiting? What connection are they making? Because more often than not, the most valuable thing a child creates isn’t the model itself; it’s the opportunity for us to better understand the unique individual who made it.

We have unwittingly restricted our own understanding



IN PRACTICE FIVE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER...

What is the child trying to communicate that they may not yet have the words to say?

Consider whether the marks, construction, movement, role play or creation represent an experience, emotion, memory or idea.

What connection is the child making? How might this creation link to a recent experience, a fascination, a story, a relationship or something they have noticed in the world around them?

What thinking has taken place that isn’t immediately visible?

Rather than focusing solely on the finished product, reflect on the decisions, problem-solving, experimentation and revisions that happened along the way.

How has this child chosen to represent their understanding?

Why this medium? Why these materials? Why this story, movement, model or image? What does their chosen form of expression reveal about how they make meaning?

What might I learn about the child if I view this as communication rather than creativity?

How could this deepen your understanding of their interests, identity, relationships, emotions or current theories about the world?



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

Hands-on with hot & cold

*From colourful collages to musical icicles, **Karen Hart** suggests creative ways to explore temperature...*

The subject of hot and cold is a great one to explore with early years children, as it can be used to cover the whole curriculum, including lots of inspiration for imaginative and expressive arts activities. It's an easy theme to take further, too, by providing opportunities for children to experiment, such as replacing water play with ice cubes and investigating what happens when you sprinkle salt on ice.

HOT & COLD COLLAGES

We made these collages on separate days with everyone working together to create big posters for wall displays – they looked beautiful!

You will need:

- 2 sheets of white paper large enough to use for a wall display
- Old magazines, catalogues, scrap paper, etc.
- Paper glue or glue sticks

We began by talking about colours that make us think of feeling hot (e.g. yellows, reds and oranges like flames) and colours that make us think of feeling cold (e.g. white like ice and snow, and greys like a cold, wintry sky).

Start the activity by drawing a large, simple outline of a well-known “hot” object on one sheet of paper (we used the sun). On the other sheet of paper, draw a cold object (we used a snowman here). Next, help children sort through the magazines, tearing out all the warm-coloured pieces of paper and putting these in a pile. Do the same with the cold shades, putting these in a separate pile.

Working on one collage at a time, children can choose which colours



they would like to use from the pile of papers, tearing off smaller pieces to fill in the collages as they please.

Display your collages side by side to show how the different colours and shades create different effects.

We extended the activity further with a robot art activity. This time, children were given lots of pre-cut shapes (circles, squares, triangles, semicircles, etc.), cut from both hot- and cold-coloured paper and craft materials (this is also good shape-recognition practice). This time we not only used coloured paper but also cotton wool (for snow), and kitchen foil (for ice; it works well when crinkled), plus tissue paper and textured and patterned craft papers. Children also helped to look for additional materials to use, finding plenty of images in the magazines.

Next, children simply chose to make either a hot or a cold robot, building the design as they worked. We did have some pre-made examples for children to look at as a guide, plus some robot-themed picture

books – *Ten Little Robots*, by Mike Brownlow, is a favourite – for inspiration.

This activity works well with small groups of children working with an adult, giving them the opportunity to discuss their ideas and receive help if needed. They not only learnt about hot and cold colours, but also gained practical skills such as cutting, which they did with help, also discovering that it's really difficult to cut tissue paper with scissors that are sticky from glue, and that cotton wool is easier to handle when rolled up into a little ball before glueing in place – the technicalities of being creative!

2 FORAGED SUNCATCHERS

You will need:

- Knitting yarn
- Card (shiny if possible)
- Saucer to draw around
- Shiny craft materials
- Grasses, leafy twigs, etc.
- Hole punch
- Glue sticks
- Scissors

Start this small-group activity by showing children how to plait. We cut six lengths of yarn, dividing these into three sections, before encouraging children to have a go at plaiting them together – with help. Tip: fix one end of your threads to a table using some strong tape to keep the yarn taut while you plait.

Next, let children draw round a saucer placed on some shiny card if available; if not, plain card or a paper plate is fine. Cut out your circle and decorate with shiny craft materials. We added some sun rays to our suncatcher using kitchen foil. Once decorated,

Hot and cold can be used to cover the whole curriculum

make a hole in your suncatcher to thread your plait through, using this as a hanging loop.

Go on to help children collect some grasses, leafy stems, dandelions, etc., from an outside space and carefully poke through the gaps in your plait. Finally, hang your suncatcher in a sunny position, so it twinkles in the breeze.

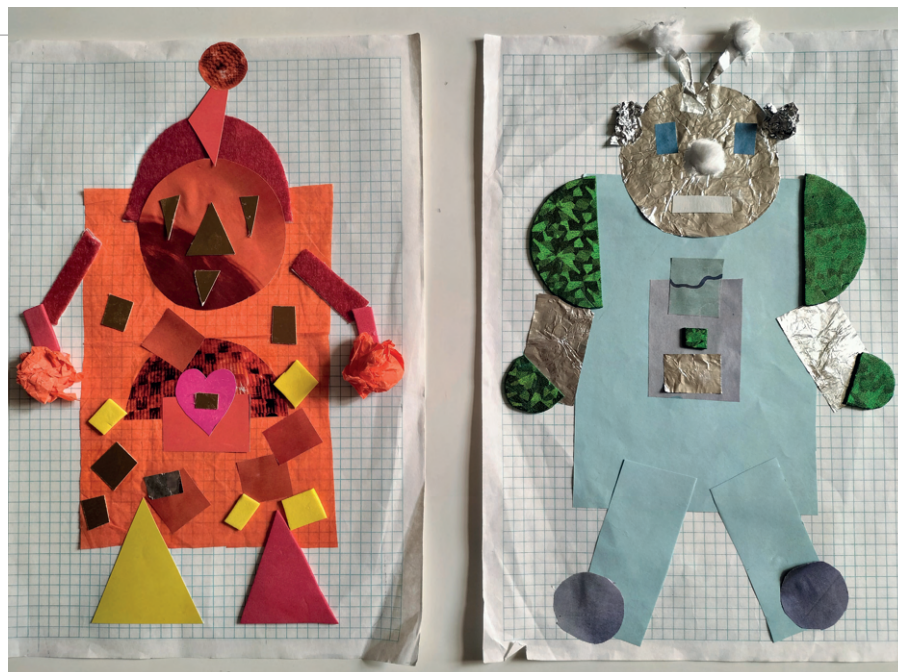
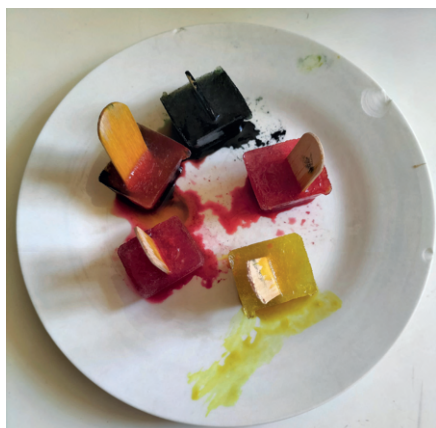
3 HOME-MADE ICE PAINTS

We had a lot of fun with these ice paints – they're best kept for cooler days as they melt quite quickly. It's a good idea to make a big batch, and aprons are a must!

You will need:

- Ice cube trays
- Food colouring in various colours
- Craft (lolly) sticks cut into approximately 3 sections each to make little handles (the wider ones work best)
- Thick paper
- Tray to work on, as things can get a bit wet

Start by filling your ice cube trays with water, adding a few drops of food colouring to each compartment. This works better than mixing the colour in a jug first, as you want strong colours to produce vibrant results. A good colour to use is black, as black food colouring is a combination of different colours, which separate



as the ice melts, producing a swirly, multicoloured effect.

Place your ice cube trays in a freezer until ice starts to form into a semi-frozen state – approximately 15 minutes. Then carefully place a section of craft stick into the centre of each ice cube before returning to the freezer until completely frozen, preferably overnight.

Once completely frozen, pop the frozen cubes out of their trays for children to paint with, using the craft sticks as handles. Point out the different colours you can see as the colours mix together.

If you prefer, you can leave the craft sticks out altogether, with children simply sliding the coloured cubes across a sheet of thick paper placed in a tray – this works especially well with younger age groups.



THREE MORE IDEAS...

Musical icicles: Tell children that they're going to pretend to be icicles, explaining that icicles are long, pointy, frozen pieces of ice. Ask them to stand completely still, maybe with pointy frozen fingers, etc. Then, when you tell them the sun is coming out, everyone slowly melts into a puddle. A good piece of "melting" music to accompany this activity is "Arabian Dance", from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker Suite*.

Hot and cold interest table: This is a good way to involve family and carers. Ask if anyone has any small items (nothing expensive or precious) that can be brought in and shared, such as a polar bear toy, ice-scraper, sunglasses or hand fan. Use the items to make a display table of hot-and-cold-related items for children to explore.

Watercolour ice cube painting:

This is perfect on a warm day outside. Simply get a big bag of ice cubes, pour them into a large tray, and let children paint directly onto them with watercolour paints. They look like coloured jewels as they shimmer in the sunlight, and children get to see the colours mix as they melt, creating new colours.



TOIVO HENRIKSSON IS AN AUTHOR AND THE DIRECTOR OF MOOSICOLOGY

Music boosts minds

*Research shows the profound impact musical experiences can have on the developing brain, as **Toivo Henriksson** explains...*

Walk into almost any early years setting and you'll hear music woven throughout the day. Children sing a morning welcome song, clap along to nursery rhymes, and eagerly join in with action songs such as "Heads, shoulders, knees and toes". These musical experiences are often among the highlights of a child's day, and for generations, they have been valued simply because children enjoy them. Today, however, advances in neuroscience and developmental psychology are uncovering the remarkable ways in which music can support early development, with a growing body of research suggesting that these experiences can strengthen the cognitive, language and emotional skills that children rely on throughout their lives.

So, what does the latest research tell us, and what does it mean for everyday practice in early years settings?

THE ROOTS OF READING

Of all the developmental gains linked to music, the connection to language and literacy is the most extensively researched. A 2026 systematic review by Natati, Mignolli and Urbani brought together evidence from multiple studies involving children from birth to six years of age and found that musical experiences consistently support key aspects of language development, including vocabulary, listening skills, verbal memory, and phonological awareness.

These findings build on Politimou and colleagues' earlier, widely cited 2019 study, *Born to Speak and Sing*, which found that young children with stronger rhythm and melody skills also showed stronger phonological awareness, one of the strongest known

predictors of later reading success. This puts nursery rhymes and clapping games in a rather different light: they're not just preparation for literacy but an integral part of it.

The case for developing rhythmic skills from an early age becomes even stronger when we consider later reading difficulties. A study by Descamps and colleagues in 2025 found that rhythm training improved word-reading accuracy in children with dyslexia. The findings suggest that the timing skills involved in music may overlap with those used to decode written language. Although the study focused on older children rather than those in the early years, it reinforces

*Music appears
to help develop
attention skills*

the importance of developing rhythmic skills from an early age. Through body percussion, marching, or drumming, young children are developing rhythmic timing skills that may support later reading development.

ATTENTION AND SELF-REGULATION

Most group activities eventually reach the same point. The children begin to fidget, someone can't quite wait for their turn, and a few curious eyes wander elsewhere. Far from being unusual, these moments reflect the fact that young children's attention and self-regulation are still developing. Rather than simply capturing children's attention, music appears to help develop the skills that enable them to sustain it.

A 2025 meta-analysis by Lu and

colleagues suggests that music can play an important role in developing these skills. The review found that regular, structured musical experiences for children aged three to six strengthened executive functions, including working memory, inhibition control and cognitive flexibility. These findings are unsurprising when we look at what music asks children to do. Singing a song they like requires them to remember lyrics and stay in time with others, while musical games involve listening carefully, waiting for the right moment to join in and responding to changing rhythms or cues. In each of these moments, children are practising the very skills that support successful learning.

One memory that has stayed with me is watching a close relative as a toddler struggle to sit still for more than a few minutes. Yet the moment music began, he would become completely absorbed until the song had finished. Only years later, when I started researching the effects of music on children's development, did I realise there was far more happening than I had understood at the time.

Beyond individual observations, the wider body of research points in the same direction. Cai and colleagues reported consistent improvements in executive function across a wider childhood age range of three to 12 years, adding further weight to the growing evidence that music supports cognitive development throughout childhood, strengthening the case for using it more intentionally within everyday practice.

Music also has a remarkable ability to help children navigate their emotions. Young children often experience big emotions before they

have the language to explain them, and feelings of frustration, disappointment or overwhelm can quickly lead to tears or tantrums. In these moments, a gentle song or lullaby can help children feel safe, reduce emotional intensity and settle more peacefully for nap time.

For many teachers, this is what they have observed for years. Music often transforms moments when attention is beginning to drift or emotions are running high, making routines and group activities more enjoyable while helping children remain engaged and focused on the task at hand.

IN PRACTICE

You don't need any special equipment or a dedicated music session to put the research into practice. These simple, fun activities can be used throughout the day whenever the opportunity arises.

1 Leave a gap

Pause before the final word or phrase of a familiar song and let the children fill it in. For example, sing "*Old MacDonald had a...*" and wait for the children to call out "*farm!*" This encourages anticipation, recall and phonological awareness

2 Clap the beat

Choose a favourite song and encourage the little ones to clap, tap or march to the steady beat. As their confidence grows, try changing the tempo or introducing simple percussion instruments to keep the activity engaging.

3 Play a simple rhyming game

Pick a word from a song or story and ask the children to take turns finding as many rhyming words as they can. As children's language develops, repeat the activity with different words throughout the week to keep it fresh and engaging.

4 Play musical statues or musical chairs

Play games such as musical statues or musical chairs, pausing the music unexpectedly so the children must freeze and wait for it to begin again. These playful activities encourage careful listening, sustained attention and inhibition control as children respond to changing musical cues.

5 Create a calm space with music

Play gentle music before and during nap time to create a calm, reassuring atmosphere. Soft melodies can help children relax, settle their emotions and prepare for rest, making nap time a more peaceful experience for everyone – including you.

MUSIC MATTERS

Music has long been valued in early years settings because it brings children together and makes learning enjoyable. The latest research suggests it offers far more than that. Every song, rhyme and rhythmic activity provides opportunities to strengthen the language, literacy, attention and self-regulation skills that underpin later learning, with benefits that can last a lifetime.

The most encouraging message is that practitioners do not need to change what they already do. None of this requires anything radically new. You don't need to be a music specialist, or have an entire music session bolted onto an already full day. Many of these musical experiences already happen every day, and by using them more intentionally, you can make the most of opportunities to support children's wider development.

Visit moosicology.com



Sing, listen and play!

In Plato's view, "the patterns in music and all the arts are the keys to learning" – here **Jude Harries** suggests simple ways to harness their educational potential...

Keys to movement

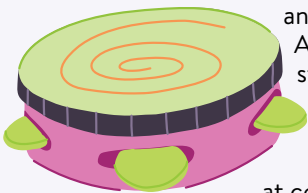
AFTER EIGHT

Develop children's coordination, rhythm and timing by asking them to stay on the spot and stretch up high and low, then stretch out wide and narrow, as you count to eight. Then try eight beats of walking around. Gradually decrease the count to six and then four, and ask children to alternate between stretching on the spot and walking.



STOP AND START

Ask all the children to sit together in a circle. Place a musical instrument or sound maker in front of each child. Invite children to play the instruments as you sing: *Play and play and play and STOP! x2 / Play up high, play down low / Play so fast, play so slow*. Use these signs for start and stop using your hands: Arms open, palms up = start. Arms open, hands down with closed fists = stop. Invite children to take turns at conducting the circle.



AUTUMN LEAVES

Invite the children to sit in a circle holding on to a large piece of fabric or a small parachute. Practise moving the fabric up and down together in time to the beat of a drum. Place some real autumn leaves on top of the fabric and watch them float up and down. Alternatively, try leaf printing or rubbing and cut out the shapes from thin paper to add to the fabric. Try singing this song to the tune of "The wheels on the bus" as the leaves move:

Autumn leaves float up and down / Up and down, up and down / Autumn leaves float up and down / Down to the ground.



Keys to PSED

HIDE & SEEK

Ask for a volunteer to leave the room and wait while another child hides a toy, watched carefully by everybody else. Instead of saying "hot" or "cold", invite the children to tap quietly (using two fingers on their palm) when the seeker is far away and clap louder when they're near the hiding place. Next time, try using slow and fast prompts with clapping or rhythm instruments.

DOGGIE, DOGGIE

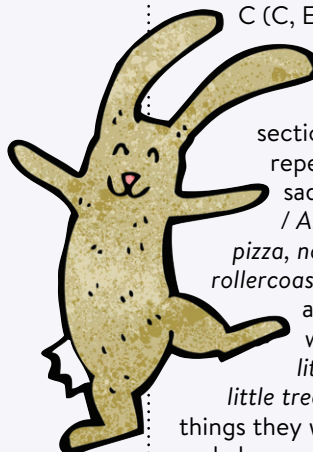
Ask the children to sit in a circle. Invite one child, the doggie, to sit in the middle. Sing this song together using "cuckoo" notes (G and E): *Doggie, doggie, where's your bone? / Someone stole it from your home / Who stole the bone? / I stole the bone*. Ask the doggie to close their eyes and listen carefully. As the children sing, walk around the circle and place the bone (e.g. a single clave or stick) behind one child. They sing the last line on their own. Can the doggie identify the thief?



SAD LITTLE BUNNY*

This song uses two contrasting chords: A minor (A, C, E), which sounds "sad", and C (C, E, G), which sounds "happy".

They can be played on the ukulele, guitar or keyboard, or with chime bars. The first section should be said over the repeated chord of Am, slowly and sadly: *There was a sad little bunny / All alone in his hole / With no pizza, no bicycle, no PlayStation, no rollercoaster*. Change to the C chord, and say these words very fast with a big smile: *Under a... happy little tree, happy little tree, happy little tree*. Children can think of four things they would feel sad to be without and change the words in the sad section.



Keys to communication

MY TURN, YOUR TURN

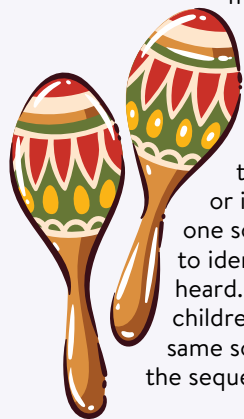
Explore copying games where children watch and then mirror your sounds and actions. Start with simple clapping rhythms for children to copy. Add in some other body percussion such as stamping, tapping, and clicking. Invite children to take turns to make up rhythms for others to copy. Choose one rhythm that is "forbidden" using the words "Don't clap that one back." (I I II I) Can the children listen carefully and take care not to copy this rhythm?

MUSICAL PATTERNS

Let children work in pairs and choose two sounds they can make using their voices. Ask them to create a sound pattern by alternating their two sounds. Try again using body percussion sounds such as clapping, clicking, tapping and stamping. Give them an opportunity to explore different sounds on untuned musical instruments. Can they create a musical pattern playing some sounds on the tambourine and some sounds on a maraca? Invite partners to share the results with the rest of the children.

SOUND INVESTIGATORS

Choose three contrasting instruments (drum, maraca, triangle) or sound makers (zips, keys, tapping spoons, scrunchy biscuit trays) and demo to the children so that the sounds become familiar. Set up a place to hide the sounds, behind a screen or inside a cardboard box. Play one sound and invite the children to identify which instrument they heard. Play a sequence of sounds for children to recall. Provide a set of the same sound makers for them to copy the sequence.



TIP:
Use simple songs and chants to transform regular routines into fun activities. Energise lining up time by singing children's names: "Cillian, Lucy, Vinnie, Margaret – come and join the line, keep in time," etc.

Keys to core skills

COUNTING SONGS

Build up a library of counting songs. Try "One, two, three-four-five, once I caught a fish alive", "One potato, two potato" and "One, two, buckle my shoe" to practise counting forwards. Or "Five little ducks", "Five little speckled frogs", "Five fat peas" and "10 in the bed" to practise counting backwards. Count in twos by singing "The animals went in two by two". And try an extra challenge by counting backwards in twos using "Ten fat sausages". Act out the songs using children and/or props. Place cards with the songs' words or pictures in a bag for children to self-select.



READ TO THE BEAT

Enjoy reading poems and rhymes with the children. Recognition of patterns, rhymes and rhythm are key parts of learning to read. Reciting rhythmically can increase the fluency and enjoyment of a book. Make a collection of picture books that use rhymes and can be "read to the beat", e.g. *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen, *Giraffes Can't Dance* by Giles Andreae and *Room on the Broom* by Julia Donaldson.



NATURAL PATTERNS

Learn this poem about nature and patterns. *Life would be dull without patterns, Everywhere would be plain. Leaves and trees, Birds and bees, Even the autumn rain. / The world is full of patterns, Lines and spots and stripes, Houses and flags, Boots and bags, Lots of different types. / Think of natural patterns, All around the place. Shells and snails, Webs and scales, And even stars in space.*



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

MAKE TIME FOR MUSIC

Musical activities should be a regular experience for early years children, not only because they are great fun, but because the skills children will learn from taking part enhance all areas of development too. They can improve emotional wellbeing, social skills, language development and motor skills. Listening to music can develop concentration, pattern recognition and boost memory. By joining in rhymes and singing songs, taking turns in musical activities, playing movement games and exploring musical instruments, children's lives will be enriched in a multitude of ways.





ANDY DAY IS A CHILDREN'S TV PRESENTER AND AUTHOR

Every adventure begins with a story

Books can inspire, educate, encourage us to think differently, and even change the course of our lives, as Andy Day explains...



course books wonderful conductors for imparting new knowledge.

INSPIRING NEW LEARNING

Children are naturally curious, and if you're able to capture that curiosity, learning follows without much need for adult intervention. One of my favourite things is when families tell me that after watching one of my programmes or reading one of my books, their children developed a fascination with dinosaurs and wanted to learn more, went to visit the Natural History Museum, or were even inspired to go on to study palaeontology! There's something really special about the knowledge that something you've created has inspired that kind of curiosity and even, in some cases, altered the course of people's lives.

That's one of the reasons I believe stories matter so much. Their purpose isn't *just* to entertain us for half an hour before bedtime (though they do this too). On a larger scale, they encourage us to think differently and introduce us to new ideas, places and points of view. Every story opens another door to a new bit of knowledge.

FINDING THE FUN IN READING

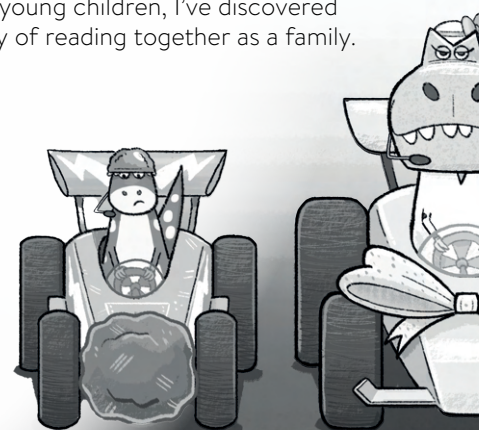
Becoming a father myself has made me even more passionate about encouraging a love of reading. Having three young children, I've discovered the joy of reading together as a family.

Some of my happiest childhood memories revolve around the books I read as a kid. A long time before I was on TV or had even thought about writing stories of my own, I loved how books could transport me to somewhere completely different. One day you could be exploring prehistoric worlds filled with dinosaurs, the next you could be travelling through space – that is the power that books hold!

I was lucky enough to have teachers in school who understood that reading should never feel like a slog. They introduced us to stories that made us laugh, think and ask questions. Growing up, I didn't necessarily imagine that books and storytelling would become such an important part of my own career. I always loved performing, entertaining people and making them smile. That's why television, pantos, and

the formation of "Andy and the Band" made so much sense, as they let me turn this passion for entertainment into a career.

When I first started children's TV presenting, my main aim was always to entertain. If the children were enjoying themselves watching my programmes, I felt I was doing my job well. But throughout my career in television, and specifically through presenting the programmes I do – which have a really strong focus on learning about animals, dinosaurs, and the overall history of the natural world – I realised the educational capacity of entertainment. Education and entertainment are by no means mutually exclusive, and in fact, ensuring that children are kept entertained, that their focus is on you and that you're able to keep their attention, makes entertainment forms such as television, theatre, and of



It's so much fun to see my children laughing and enjoying themselves while reading, but it's also really interesting to see how each of them has such a unique perspective on the stories and characters in the books we read. And it's wonderful to see how they use books as a jumping-off point for their own imaginations, creating stories based on what we've read together.

When we're reading and they interrupt to ask questions, comment

Reading is no fun when it feels like a chore

on pictures, or make predictions about what will happen to each of the characters, I find it so rewarding because it means that they're engaged with the story. I can see in real time how books help to foster an interest in the world around them, develop the skill of curiosity, give them confidence to ask questions, and introduce them to empathy through fictional characters. The words on the page are also helping them to build vocabulary and communication skills without them even realising it. And importantly, they're creating happy memories that become associated with books and reading for years to come.

As parents and as educators, I know we can sometimes worry about getting children to read enough. It's a very valid concern, especially today in the UK where we're facing a reading crisis and worryingly low literacy rates. This

is why I'm proud to have been a 2026 National Year of Reading Ambassador, working to promote a love of reading in children across the country. One thing I've learned through this role, as well as through my role as a children's author and a father, is that in order to get children reading, it is vital to make it as much fun as possible.

Parents and teachers have a lot of power here. You can do silly voices for each character, make funny faces to show different emotions, or pick out books with lots of colourful illustrations. I've also found that it's really useful to start with books around topics that you know your children are already interested in. If they love outer space, start with a book about planets! Or if they can't get enough of the zoo, maybe try to find a book about wildlife. Reading is no fun when it feels like a chore, so doing everything in your power to help children discover that reading is something they can genuinely enjoy is a great first step.

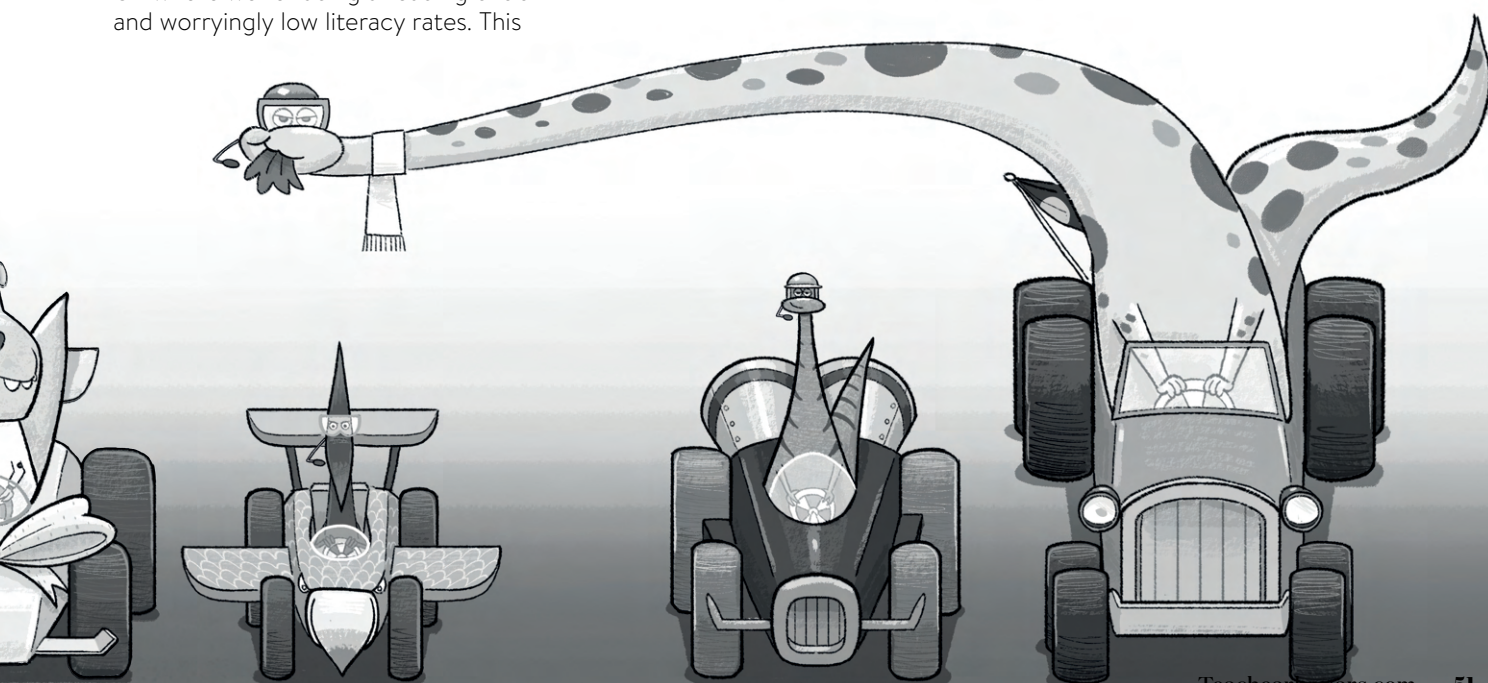
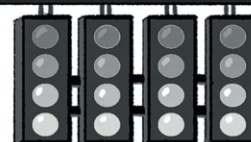
MAKING EDUCATION EXCITING

I've been so fortunate to write my own children's books about a topic that I am genuinely interested in: dinosaurs! Like with reading, the writing process is so much simpler when you are writing about something that truly excites you, even as an adult. I wanted to write stories that children would be excited to pick up, but also encourage continued learning, which is why I try to pack as many fun dino facts as I can into my books.

Looking ahead, I'm excited to continue writing books that I hope will bring both joy and knowledge to my readers. Dinosaur fans out there should keep an eye out for some new dino-tastic titles coming to bookshops near you in 2027!

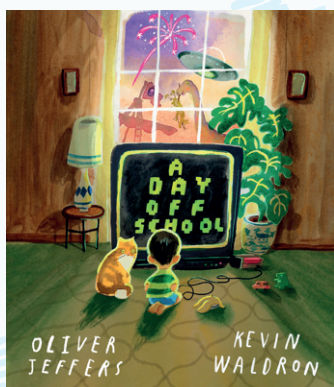


Andy is the author of the bestselling *Dino Dad* and *Dylan the Dino Boy* book series. His new picture book, *Dylan the Dino Boy Saves the Zoo*, and the first book in the brand-new *Dino Racers* series, *Dino Racers: The Jungle Cup and The Lava Cup*, are both published by Puffin Books and are available to purchase now.



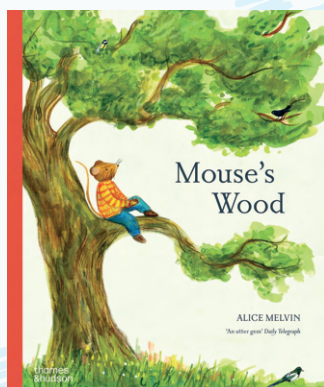
The Book Corner

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



A DAY OFF SCHOOL (HCCB, Hardback, £14.99)

Herbie has the sniffles and tries his luck in getting a day off school, thinking it's much better to be at home. He builds a fort from the sofa cushions, practises his yo-yo tricks, watches cartoons and starts a drawing of a dinosaur, and by lunchtime he's already gone through everything on his list. Boredom creeps in fast, and his thoughts drift back to school, wondering if he's missing an extra playtime, the excitement of a dog on the loose, or something wilder like a pirate invasion. Oliver Jeffers' familiar wit pairs well with Kevin Waldron's expressive illustrations, which do a good deal of the storytelling on their own, so children can follow the story without needing every word read aloud. When Herbie goes back to school the next day, it's just as boring as he remembered... or is it?! The book gives children plenty to talk about, including how they might spend a day off, what they'd miss by staying home, and whether Herbie's day off was worth it in the end.



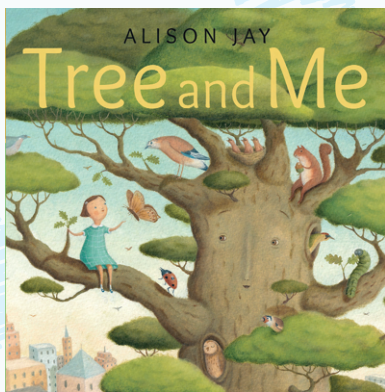
MOUSE'S WOOD (Thames and Hudson, Paperback, £8.99)

Alice Melvin takes readers through a full year in the wood, following Mouse as he experiences something different each month, from a cosy January morning snuggled in bed to marshmallows by the fire with Fox come November. Small peep-through doors and lift-the-flap openings reveal each animal's home, rewarding children who return to the page more than once, since there's always another detail tucked into a corner of the illustration. The rhyming text moves at an unhurried pace that matches Mouse's own wandering journey, and a map at the front lets children retrace where they've been as the story unfolds. At the back, factual notes about the wood's plants and creatures provide context for the story. This is a book perfect for sharing again and again, as it gives children plenty to notice, from the turn of the seasons to the friendships that shape Mouse's year.



MAGPIE AND THE SPARKLING WORDS (Templar Books, Paperback, £7.99)

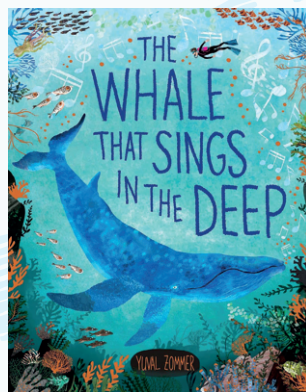
Magpie loves the sound of a good word so much that she starts collecting them, tucking each one into her nest until the wood around her falls silent and the other animals have nothing left to say. Lucy Rowland's rhyming text has real bounce, playing with bold, glossary-worthy vocabulary that gives the story a second life as a word-building tool alongside the plot. Craig Shuttlewood's illustrations glitter to match, especially in the storm scene, when Magpie's nest is torn apart and her hoarded words go scattering down to the ground. Magpie slowly realises that words only shine once they're shared, and the animals help her rebuild, uncovering a seed among the wreckage that grows into a tree populated with words for everyone. A glossary and a word tree at the back add practical value for adults reading alongside children, making this a strong pick for building vocabulary through story.



TREE AND ME

(Old Barn Books,
Hardback, £12.99)

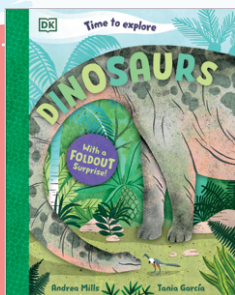
Daisy and Pedro find an acorn on a walk in the woods and decide to plant it, watching it grow from a shoot to a tendril and eventually into a sapling that takes hold in their patch of ground. Alison Jay, working in the crackled, oil-painted style she first used for *Bee and Me*, fills each page with birds, bugs, butterflies and squirrels drawn to the tree as it matures, giving the story a lived-in, increasingly busy feel as the seasons pass. The words stay minimal throughout, leaving the artwork to do most of the storytelling. When autumn comes and the leaves fall, jays gather up the fallen acorns, and Daisy and Pedro follow, replanting them further into the landscape and setting a new generation of trees in motion. It's a gentle, cumulative picture book about the long life of a single tree and the small acts that play a part in rewilding.



THE WHALE THAT SINGS IN THE DEEP

(OUP, Hardback, £12.99)

Yuval Zommer follows a blue whale's migration from the cold waters of its Arctic birthplace to the warmth of its wintering grounds, tracing a journey that feels vast and magical. The text leans on rich vocabulary such as *krill*, *dappled light* and the *churn of the sea*, folded into a refrain that shifts slightly with each turn of the page and invites children to join in. Zommer's double-page seascapes are stunning, layering blues and greens with enough detail to draw children in. A moment when the whale becomes tangled in a fishing net offers jeopardy without becoming anything too frightening, while factual notes at the back cover whale size, breath-holding and migration, enhancing the book's educational value. This is a strong choice for introducing ocean life and discussing the risks whales face on their journeys, told through a story gentle enough for the youngest listeners.



TIME TO EXPLORE DINOSAURS

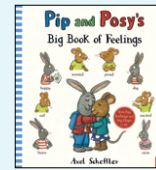
(Dorling Kindersley)

Three ways to explore the days when dinosaurs ruled the Earth with this fact-packed title...

- Print/draw the 13 creatures from the book and get children to order them smallest to biggest. Finish with a giant unrolled paper *Argentinosaurus*, echoing the book's fold-out reveal.
- Set out small-world dinosaurs alongside loose parts, e.g. blue fabric for the ocean, sand for land and twigs for burrows. Invite children to match each creature to the habitat it lives in.
- Draw a large dinosaur outline and let children fill it in with different textures and materials, e.g. crumpled paper for scales, cotton wool for clouds and green tissue for foliage.

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Have you seen these fantastic publications?



Pip and Posy's Big Book of Feelings

(Nosy Crow, Board book, £12.99)

In this book, Axel Scheffler gives each feeling its own spread, from sadness and excitement to shyness and pride, pairing a big central illustration with smaller scenes that show why a child might feel that way. Flaps lift to reveal more detail, and a closing game with Pip and Posy invites children to guess the emotion from the scene shown, making this a warm, practical tool for building emotional vocabulary.



Are You Looking At Me?

(Little Tiger, Paperback, £8.99)

Philip Ardagh and Enrico Lorenzi poke gentle fun at bravado in this rhyming tale of Big Brown Bear, who's convinced that he's the scariest creature in the forest – until the animals around him start to suggest otherwise. The alliteration comes thick and fast, and Lorenzi's bold, fluorescent illustrations play fully into the joke, making this a lively read-aloud with real laughs for younger children.



We Are All One

(Little Tiger, Harback, £12.99)

Author/illustrator

Britta Teckentrup's die-cut pages link one spread to the next, each opening framed by the shape of the one before it, as simple, lyrical lines describe rain, rivers, wind and growth. The message of unity between people and the natural world stays gentle throughout, and Teckentrup's richly patterned artwork will give your young readers plenty of detail to pore over on every page.



Take a seat at the
narrators' tea party
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Once Upon A Nativity

AGE
3-6



Gaynor Boddy & Rebecca Kincaid



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A story-led Nativity for ages three to six, with memorable songs, flexible casting and plenty of support for a confident first performance

AT A GLANCE

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- Seven songs with vocal and backing MP3s and Words on Screen™ lyrics
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REVIEWED BY EMMA THOMPSON



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For many nursery and Reception children, the Christmas performance may be their first introduction to the Nativity story, so getting the balance right matters. *Once Upon a Nativity* does this beautifully. Written for ages three to six, it retells the traditional story through a tea party for narrators, giving children a gentle, playful way into the events at Bethlehem.

The storytelling idea is such a lovely hook. Alongside the Nativity narrators are narrators who prefer love stories, action, mysteries and non-fiction, all reacting as the story unfolds. It gives the script humour and keeps the pace moving, while helping children see the excitement, emotion and surprises within the story.

Lines such as Caesar declaring himself “the big cheese” and the shepherds admitting they cannot afford Amazon vouchers will raise smiles from the adults without taking anything away from the Nativity tale itself.

There are seven songs, which feels just right for this age group. They are short, catchy and easy to remember, while giving each part of the story its own moment. “A Great Big Story” introduces the characters beautifully, “Clippety-Clippety-Clop” turns the journey to Bethlehem into an encouraging group number, and “Softly Sleeping” is exactly the sort of gentle song you can imagine little voices singing around the manger.

Vocal MP3s let children learn with support before performing to the instrumental tracks, while scores are included for those wanting live accompaniment.

Casting has also been made wonderfully manageable. There are 34 speaking parts, but these can be increased by dividing the Nativity narrators' lines or reduced to 22 for a smaller cohort. There are expandable groups of centurions, citizens, angels and shepherds, plus optional mice for very young performers during “Softly Sleeping”. That gives practitioners plenty of scope to find a role that feels right for every child.

The staging is refreshingly achievable. A Bethlehem skyline or starry backdrop works throughout, while teacups, saucers and cakes create the narrators' tea party. Costume suggestions are imaginative but doable, from a heart-covered outfit for the Love Narrator to familiar superhero and detective dressing-up clothes. The editable script, props guidance and costume list mean less time organising and more time helping all the children feel secure and confident.

The extras are where Out of the Ark goes above and beyond. Makaton signing videos make the songs more inclusive, choreography videos provide simple actions, and a Classroom Inspiration resource links the production to story mapping, counting in the *Cake Shop*,

journeys, percussion and encouragement banners. *Once Upon a Nativity* is sweet, funny and perfectly suited to young performers. It turns a first Nativity experience into something children, practitioners and families can treasure.

THE VERDICT

- ✓ A gentle introduction to the Nativity for younger children
- ✓ Distinctive storytelling structure with plenty of warmth and humour
- ✓ Short, memorable songs that little voices will sound gorgeous singing
- ✓ Flexible roles make whole-group inclusion much easier
- ✓ Classroom ideas extend the experience beyond rehearsals

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The Right Start to 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 an early years adviser.

Visit therightstartearlyyears.co.uk



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DISCOVER HIDDEN CHALLENGES

SNAP is a group of online, diagnostic profilers that focus on maths learning difficulties, behavioural needs (SEMH), and specific learning difficulties (SpLD). With three options (SNAP Maths, SNAP-B, and SNAP-SpLD), SNAP generates personalised reports for SENCOs, learning resources and strategies, and further supporting materials. SNAP's triangulated approach involves parents and carers in their pupil's support with a parent questionnaire and personalised reports. It also covers the biggest range of specific learning difficulties (20) and behavioural needs (17), including maths-specific learning difficulties. The Core Profile makes identifying areas of need quick and easy. **Learn more at hachettelearning.com/assessment/sen**



Reception readiness starts with movement

As conversations around “school readiness” continue to dominate early education, one area cannot afford to be overlooked: physical development. Children are increasingly arriving at school with weaker core strength, poor balance, reduced stamina and delayed movement competence; factors that directly impact attention, self-regulation, communication and early writing. We must remember movement is not separate from learning; it is the foundation of it. Yet many children today are spending longer periods being sedentary and less time in active play. The Physical Activity Adventure Pack (PAAP) supports Reception educators in embedding purposeful movement through imaginative, engaging and curriculum-linked activities. **Visit tinyurl.com/tp-PAAP**

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platform Tapestry



**JAMES HEMSALL
OBE**

is managing director
of Coram Hemsall's

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CHARLI HENLEY-CARTER IS HEAD OF CULTURE AT TOPS DAY NURSERIES

Why nurseries are choosing employee ownership

Every day in the early years sector, we talk about putting children first. We know that when children feel safe, valued and listened to, they flourish. The same is true for the adults who care for them.

Across the UK, more nursery providers are becoming Employee Ownership Trusts (EOTs) – a different way of owning a business that puts its people at the heart of its future. Rather than being owned by one individual or external shareholders, the business is held in trust for the benefit of its employees.

At first glance, that may sound like a business decision, but it's actually much more important. It creates environments where colleagues feel valued, heard and invested in the future of the organisation. When that happens, the children benefit too.

PROTECTING OUR VALUES

At Tops Day Nurseries, becoming an EOT wasn't simply about changing ownership. It was about protecting the values that have shaped the organisation for more than 35 years, while giving colleagues a greater voice in its future. From the very beginning, founder Cheryl Hadland was passionate about ensuring the legacy of Tops would continue for generations to come. Becoming an EOT safeguards the organisation long term, helping to ensure it cannot be sold in a way that undermines its values or disrupts the continuity of care that children and families rely on.

In early years, relationships are everything. Children build confidence through familiar faces, trusted routines and adults who know them well. Families value continuity, and educators know that strong attachments help children feel secure enough to explore, learn and grow. That's why investing in our teams matters so much.

When people feel recognised, supported and able to influence the organisation they work for, they are more likely to stay. They bring experience, consistency and a sense of purpose that no recruitment campaign can replace. An EOT helps create that sense of belonging. It sends a simple message: every colleague matters, every voice counts, and every person contributes to the success of the nursery.

"Every colleague matters, every voice counts"

LONG-TERM THINKING

At Tops, this commitment goes beyond words. Colleagues become Partners in the business upon passing their probation period; the teams are represented through an EOT Board and a Colleague Council, which enables everyone to share ideas, raise concerns and help shape the future of the organisation. It creates a culture where listening isn't just encouraged – it's built into the way the whole business operates.

That matters because the people closest to children often have the

best ideas of how to improve their experiences. When educators feel confident in speaking up, innovation follows. Small changes suggested by the teams can make a big difference to children's daily lives, whether that's improving routines, enriching learning environments or finding better ways to support families.

Employee ownership also encourages organisations to think for the long term. Rather than focusing on short-term returns, decisions can be centred on what will make the biggest difference over the years ahead: investing in training, wellbeing, career development and high-quality learning environments.

These investments don't only benefit the people working for the business. They benefit every child who walks through the nursery door. Children experience calmer environments when teams work well together. They build stronger relationships when familiar educators remain in place. Parents gain confidence when they see stable teams who know their child, understand their development and genuinely care about their family.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE

While becoming an EOT doesn't automatically improve outcomes, it creates the conditions where great practice can thrive. It recognises a simple truth that all those in early years already understand: people are the greatest resource any nursery has.

In many ways, the principles behind employee ownership mirror the principles we use every day with children. We believe in listening. We believe everyone should have a voice. We believe people achieve more when they feel they belong. Perhaps that is why employee ownership feels like such a natural fit for early years.



Visit topsdaynurseries.co.uk



DR HELEN EDWARDS IS CO-FOUNDER OF CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PLATFORM TAPESTRY

STAFF SUPERVISION: *How strategic is your SDP?*

Staff supervision isn't something you always connect with a setting's development plan, but having read more than 50 recent Ofsted reports, it's clear that this is what many "Strong" and "Exceptional" settings do. A setting's development plan (SDP) is a strategic, actionable document that helps to evaluate current provision and outline targets for continuous improvement. The SDP is likely to cover how a setting wants to improve aspects of their provision, as well as things specific to the setting – engaging families in children's learning or improving children's speech and language skills.

Reviewing the Ofsted reports, it was clear that many settings identify areas for improvement for staff and provide suitable training and professional development opportunities. However, there was little evidence to suggest that leaders view

supervisions as intrinsically linked to their SDP.

For settings rated "Expected standard" or "Needs attention", inspectors report that basic requirements are met, but that the strategic link is missing. This "compliance-only" approach might say something like, *"Managers carry out regular supervisions and check staff workloads. However, leaders do not precisely target staff development to ensure the highest quality of teaching across the setting."*

In contrast, "Exceptional" judgements describe a clear link between supervision and a setting's strategic plan and might say, *"Leaders*

are highly effective in monitoring staff practice. Supervisions are used incisively to identify precise training needs that align directly with the nursery's improvement priorities, rapidly raising the standard of teaching."

Similarly, the Early Years Inspection Toolkit is clear about what "Strong" includes in the Leadership and Governance section: *"Professional learning and expertise opportunities are of high quality and are precisely matched to improvement priorities and the individual needs of practitioners. They have a positive impact on the quality of provision and on practitioners' practice."*

Supervision can be an important aspect of how an SDP gets implemented. Otherwise, there's a danger of it becoming a stagnant document sitting on a manager's desk separate from what happens day-to-day at the setting.

*"Supervision is
far more than an
admin task"*

BARRIERS TO STRATEGIC SUPERVISION

I expect many managers understand that discussions with staff are essential if their SDP is to be implemented, but they may not think supervision is the right place. There are also challenges that get in the way of effective supervision.

● The "friendly colleague" trap –

Many early years managers are promoted from within a setting. Transitioning from being a peer

on the floor to a leader who must hold former colleagues accountable can be hard. Managers often fear challenging an employee on a development target or introducing strict performance measures. As a result, supervisions stop being a place where honest, development-focused conversations take place, and become comfortable, cosy chats.



353,685

Number of paid early years staff

SOURCE: NFER ANALYSIS OF SCEYP, 2025

● Compliance conversations dominate

– Safeguarding checks, health and safety updates, and policy sign-offs can dominate supervision sessions. While these are non-negotiable, they are operational rather than strategic. There needs to be space for professional dialogue and reflection, and this should include conversations about the SDP.

● **Supervision gets bumped** – Early years managers need to deal with lots of unexpected issues, whether last-minute staff absences, responding to parent and carer queries, administering first aid, or stepping into rooms to maintain legal staff-to-child ratios. Time is an incredibly scarce commodity, and supervision can be the first thing to be postponed or rushed through in 15 minutes.

BECOMING MORE STRATEGIC

The SDP establishes the strategic direction for the setting, but *how* it is going to be implemented requires the SDP to be embedded across the team. Broad goals need to be broken down into individual actions for staff, and supervision is the best place for this to be discussed. Two changes can help to make this happen.

Firstly, split supervision sessions into two clear sections, with the first being for operational updates (such as safeguarding or attendance) and the second for professional reflection, development and the SDP. This conscious divide helps prevent operational matters dominating and acts as a reminder of the importance placed on the individual's professional development and their role in supporting the SDP.

Secondly, create a bank of open-ended, reflective questions linked to the SDP for use in supervision sessions. These might include:

- Which area of our development plan do you feel you've made the biggest contribution to this month?
- What support do you need from me to confidently implement our new music and movement curriculum?
- What do you think about the new



routine of having story time before snack time? Is it working for your key children?

- How do you think we can encourage more writing in the outdoor area?
- How can we improve our partnerships with parents and carers to help support the home learning environment?

CREATE A SUPPORTIVE CULTURE

For supervision to be effective in supporting the SDP, staff need to feel safe enough to talk about their gaps in knowledge and experience, or where things have gone less well. Supervision should offer a space in which individuals can have open and honest

professional discussions in a respectful and trusted way.

Supervision is far more than an admin task that needs to be ticked off during a busy day; it's a key tool for improving the quality of your provision, and my review of Ofsted reports underlines this. Good supervision also fuels individuals' professional growth and supports staff wellbeing.

We need to reframe how we think about supervision and see it as valuable time for helping staff understand the SDP and their role in taking it forward.

Visit [tapestry.info](https://www.teachearlyyears.com)

IN PRACTICE

● Bring the SDP into the room:

Keep a physical or digital copy of your Setting Development Plan on the table during every single supervision session to anchor your conversation.

● Embed co-ownership with project leads:

Assign specific development plan priorities to different staff members based on their strengths and use supervision to check in on their progress as "project leads".

● Protected time is non-negotiable:

Treat supervision as a critical, unmovable appointment. Cancel it only in an absolute emergency and reschedule it immediately to signal its value to your team.

● Document impact, not just activity:

Instead of writing *Discussed*

sustained shared thinking, record the tangible outcome: Sarah will practise asking more open-ended questions when working one-to-one with each of her key children. Review at the next supervision.

● Pre-supervision reflection:

Give staff a brief three-question reflection sheet two days before the meeting. Ask them to identify their biggest success, their primary challenge, and how they feel they are supporting the setting's current goals.

● Conclude with the same question:

End every single supervision across the setting with the same question that focuses on the SDP: "What can we do in your room next month to help us towards our overall development goals?"



The new economics of early years

The Competition and Markets Authority has launched its study into early years education and childcare services in England, and has set out a scope that reaches well beyond so-called “hidden charges”. The sector is once again under scrutiny, but also has an important opportunity to explain how early education and childcare really works.

For providers already navigating rising staffing costs, expanded funded hours, and increasingly complex parental expectations, the question is no longer simply how to stay afloat. It's how to stay sustainable, transparent, and competitive in a sector where every financial decision made is being examined.

To do that, settings need to understand the new economics of early years and reshape business models accordingly. The market study's scope includes access to high-quality services, affordability and funding, information and choice for families, the role of local authorities and other public bodies, and the impact of different provider types and ownership structures.

Communicate clearly

Transparency is now a strategic business tool. The CMA study is a clear signal: parents and policymakers want clarity, not only about additional charges, but about the wider relationship between funding, affordability, access, quality and sustainability. Settings know the reality – that meals, consumables, enrichment activities, extended hours, SEND support, leadership time and workforce development all carry unavoidable costs. The opportunity now is to lead with transparency rather than wait for external pressure to dictate it.

In practical terms that means creating a simple, jargon-free breakdown of what funding covers and what it doesn't.

Costed examples can show the difference between funded rates and delivery costs. One-page explainers for new families can set out which items are optional, which are essential to the model, and how decisions are made. When parents understand the economics, they are far more supportive of reasonable, clearly communicated charges.

Charging sustainably

A financially resilient setting is one that prices with confidence and evidence, not fear. Many settings still price emotionally, worried about parent reaction, local competition, or the optics of raising fees. But underpricing is the fastest route to instability, especially when funded hours expand and margins can shrink. I believe the sector must stop apologising for charging sustainably. High-quality early education is a skilled, labour-intensive service. It cannot be delivered on a deficit. Too many providers our team works with do not fully calculate the true cost per hour, including non-contact time, training, SEND support,

occupancy patterns, consumables, administration and leadership overheads. Sometimes these are underestimated and sometimes over-inflated. The advice is to model three scenarios: break-even, sustainable surplus, and growth. Most definitely we should review fees annually in September, not reactively mid-year, and keep a clear evidence base that explains how the decisions made have been reached.

Staffing is everyone's biggest cost, and biggest opportunity. With wages rising and recruitment still challenging, it's the single most important business decision to make. The settings that thrive this year will treat staffing not as a cost to minimise, but as a strategic investment. Focus on staff turnover is important, because it is more expensive than retention, every time. I like micro-retention strategies such as paid induction days, mentoring, and protected non-contact time. A stable team reduces unnecessary agency spend, improves occupancy, and strengthens parent trust, all of which directly supports financial resilience. Have you ever calculated the cost of losing a staff member, including agency cover, induction time, and lost continuity?

Diversify your income

Occupancy management is the new superpower. In a world of expanded funded hours, occupancy is no longer just about filling spaces; it's about filling the right spaces at the right times. A room that looks full on paper may still be financially inefficient if the pattern of attendance creates staffing peaks and troughs. Analyse occupancy by hour, not by day, identify “dead zones”, and create targeted offers to fill those gaps, such as short-session bundles or parent-toddler transition sessions. Even small shifts in occupancy patterns can add thousands of pounds to annual revenue without increasing staffing levels.

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NURSERY MANAGEMENT

Diversify income but do it transparently. With scrutiny now extending across information, choice, affordability and market practices, diversification must be both transparent and genuinely value-adding. Parents are willing to pay for enrichment when they understand what they are getting, why it is optional, and how it sits alongside funded entitlement. There are lots of models and ideas such as forest school or outdoor learning programmes, holiday clubs, stay-and-play sessions, parent workshops, or renting space to community groups. The key here is clarity: optional, clearly priced, clearly communicated, and never presented in a way that leaves families uncertain about what is required and what is additional.

Communicate your value with confidence, because parents are not just choosing childcare; they are choosing early education, emotional security, and developmental expertise.



“Under-pricing is the fastest route to instability”

Lead the conversation

A final thought. The early years sector is essential infrastructure. Financial fragility helps no one: not children, not families, not

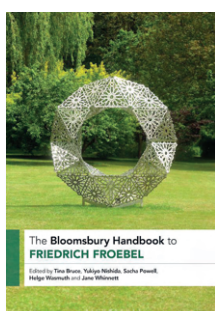
staff, and not the wider community. This September, settings have a unique opportunity to lead the conversation while the CMA’s market study is underway. By embracing transparency, pricing sustainably, investing in staff, understanding local demand, evidencing costs, and communicating value with clarity, early years providers can build a business model that is both resilient and respected.

For more information, visit coramhempfalls.org.uk

CPD BOOKSHELF

THREE READS THAT WILL IMPROVE YOUR PRACTICE...

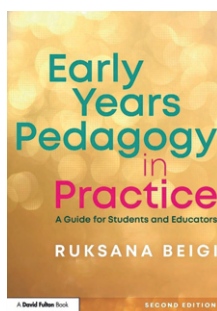
***The Bloomsbury Handbook to Friedrich Froebel*
(Bruce/Nishida/Powell/Wasmuth/
Whinnett, £35.99)**



If you’re interested in a Froebelian approach, there are few better places to start than with this comprehensive guide. Clearly set out and easy to navigate, the book showcases the very best practice around the world, inspired by the inventor of kindergarten. Topics that have the distinctive Froebelian light shone on them include pedagogy and curriculum, history, architecture, religious education and more.

Visit bloomsbury.com

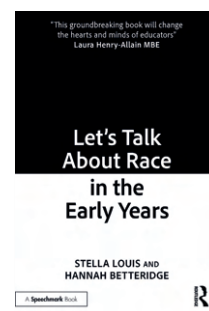
***Early Years
Pedagogy in Practice*
(Ruksana Beigi, £33.99)**



Beigi’s reflective exploration of pedagogy in the early years has been fully rewritten for this second edition, and the result is an even deeper level of engagement with this endlessly fascinating subject. Rather than suggesting one approach, Beigi encourages a broad, critical, and inclusive pedagogical repertoire, recognising the diversity of children’s experiences and the complexity of contemporary early education and settings – curious practitioners will love it.

Visit routledge.com

***Let’s Talk About Race in the Early Years*
(Stella Louis/Hannah Betteridge,
£21.99)**



No one would say it’s easy, but as practitioners, confronting our internal biases and presumptions is essential if we are to give the children in our care, and their families, the educational experience they deserve. This groundbreaking book provides the tools and techniques you need to identify and confront discriminatory practices, with strategies to break down barriers and tackle these complicated issues sensitively and constructively. Essential reading.

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“Give me a Piglet any day”

*It's impossible to ignore your most effervescent children, but nurturing those who are more timid is far more rewarding, says the **Secret Practitioner**...*

Do you have a Tigger in your classroom? If so, you're very lucky because, as we all know, “The wonderful thing about Tiggers, is Tiggers are wonderful things!” You will be in no doubt about this because they will tell you (several times a day), and may even grab you by the arm so you don't let your attention wander.

It's Monday morning and some children are clinging to their mums while others are deciding who to play with. But Tiggers will want to tell you how high they can bounce, where they bounced at the weekend and who came to see them. You won't hurt their feelings if you ask them to tell you about it later in the day. Either they will carry on regardless, or they will find someone else to impress. Tiggers need an audience.

is not English. They would be scared if a big dog bounded up to them in the street and may react in the same way to Tiggers. Like Piglet, they may feel that “it's hard to be brave when you're only a Very Small Animal”.

A Tigger in the nursery changes the dynamics. Piglets need reassurance and it will take time for them to settle in and feel secure. How do we provide that affectionate encouragement when one member of the group is sucking all the oxygen out of the air? Piglets need a routine, especially at drop-off time. Make sure an adult looks after

them and takes them through the same introductory activities, in the same order, day after day. Find jobs for Tiggers to do in the morning and introduce them into Piglet's company one step at a time. Everyone can have too much of a good thing, so it might be wise to share the load with other staff so that everyone gets a little bit of Tigger time.

One-to-one teaching and surmounting language barriers can be draining, and it will be a long time before you reap the rewards of working with a Piglet. The first time a nervous child makes eye contact with you or laughs spontaneously is a major milestone. I remember one little girl – let's call her Annie – who wore ear defenders every day for the first fortnight and would not look anyone in the eye. Over time she was coaxed to sit on the carpet with other children, and I noticed she usually sat next to a girl with ribbons in her hair. One day Annie came into nursery wearing brightly coloured ribbons and the two girls smiled at one another.

In a Disney movie, staff would have looked over the girl's head, nodded and smiled knowingly. Tigger would have bounced up, crying, “Annie, your ribbons are so beautiful,” before grabbing her hand and leading her to the small-world table. But life is not like that. Some staff were too busy to notice the ribbons and Tigger just bounced around, “because that's what Tiggers do”. However, less than a week later, the ear defenders were gone. No language, no sudden transformation. Just a fine example of non-verbal communication that made the staff feel that they were doing a really good job.

But you know, while I find Piglets especially rewarding, when the children are heading for Reception, I find I miss them all equally: the Piglets, the Tiggers – and even the occasional Eeyore.

Nurseries are not hothouses for bright, confident kids

Rarely downcast or sulky, Tiggers keep bouncing back when others would keep quiet. They like to answer every question, even those questions you have not yet had the time to ask. Tell them to give others a chance to speak and they will rein themselves in – for all of five minutes. Some nursery staff avoid making eye contact with Tiggers; others find they have developed an eye-rolling tic by the end of the day.

The entertainment value of Tiggers is enormous, but nurseries are not hothouses for bright, confident kids. Many children are bewildered and overwhelmed by a strange new environment. This is especially true of children with speech and language needs or those whose home language



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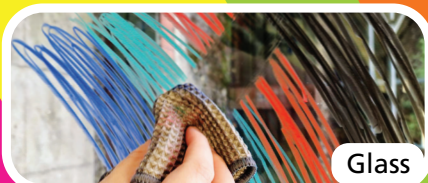
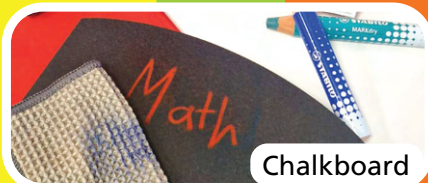
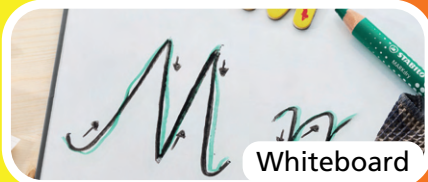
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*Blended learning combines in-person work experience in a setting with live workshops online. **Funding is subject to eligibility via Apprenticeship Levy funds or government funding. Additional financial support may also be available depending on circumstances. ***Skills Bootcamp availability and funding depend on programme, cohort and area allocation.