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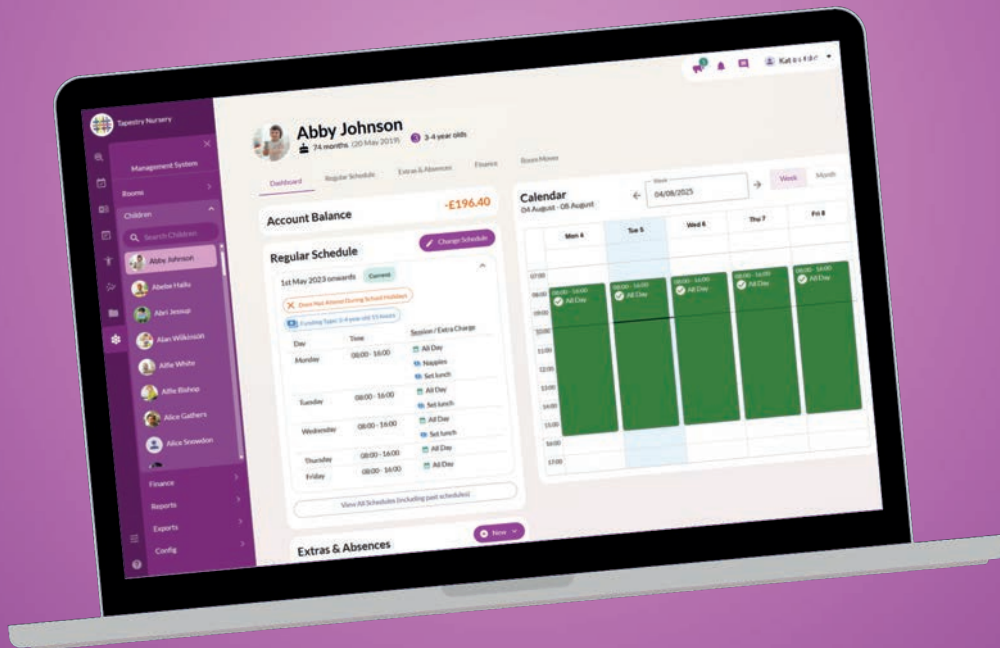


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Hello



“The opportunities to learn, grow and thrive that this government wants for every one of our children must be there right from the beginning,” writes the Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, in her foreword to *Giving every child the Best Start in Life*. That’s something I’m sure we can all

agree with; where things get more complicated is establishing how to turn principle into practice. Labour’s strategy to improve the quality of early years education and boost children’s life chances was published in early July, and as we move into September the sector is still grappling with the implications for those on the ground. As ever with government policy, the devil is in the detail, so this issue we have comprehensive coverage of what has been proposed, what it might mean for early educators and their settings, and how best to move forward – you’ll find insights from June O’Sullivan OBE, Neil Leitch, Stella Ziolkowski, and James Hemsall OBE.

Of course, that’s not all there is to enjoy over the following pages. From approaches to play-based learning around the world and the importance of helping your charges bond with books to ways to introduce the concept of consent, you’ll find plenty to inform your practice. We hope you find it useful!

Helen Mulley – Commissioning Editor



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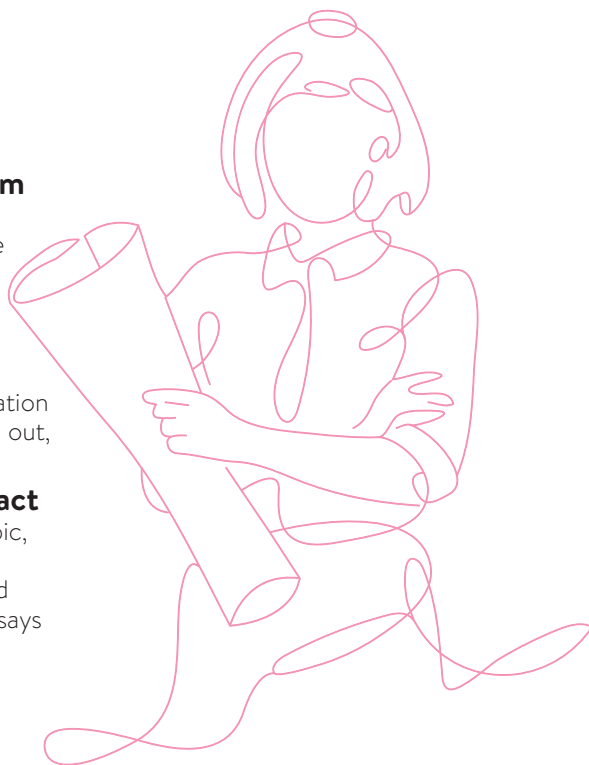
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THE EXPERTS...



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Artichoke Media Ltd



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We should consign them to history, argues the Secret Practitioner.



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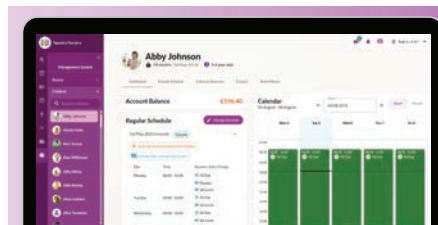
These resources unlock young children’s big emotions, says Kirstine Beeley.

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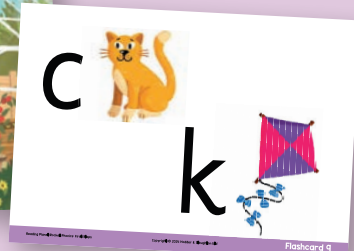
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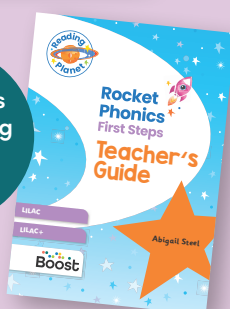
"We are loving it in our Nursery. We really like the way it is accessible to all children whatever their ability. Some children are learning their speech sounds through the scheme whilst others are reading and writing the graphemes."

Laura Foley, EYFS Teacher,
Woodlands Primary, Merseyside

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Nursery Now

News and views from the early years



In brief...

Grandir UK, home of nursery brands like Kiddi Caru and Dicky Birds, has been Great Place to Work-Certified for a third consecutive year. It has also been named as one of the UK's Best Workplaces for Women for the second year in a row.



Nursery campaign group Early Years Voice has written an open letter to the Department for Education calling for a delay in the implementation of the new Early Years Funding Statutory Guidelines and fairer funding for childcare settings. The letter has been backed by 5,327 nurseries, representing 334,432 children. Read the letter at earlyyearsvoice.org



An investigation into the charging of mandatory "top-up" fees on top of funded hours by a nursery has resulted in one family being reimbursed £1,173. By law, additional contributions must be identified and optional. Read more at tinyurl.com/TEYgTUF

Effective practice

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has published findings from seven independent evaluations of different early years programmes, building the evidence base for early years education. The evaluations focused on two key areas of the EYFS: communication and language and maths. Of the former, one programme, Concept Cat, aims to develop conceptual vocabulary in three- to four-year-olds by introducing abstract terms through stories and play, while the latter included a targeted intervention for Reception pupils, Maths Through Picture Books. Read more at tinyurl.com/TEYeefEV

"What has been heartening in the process of these trials has been the response from early years settings towards building this evidence base."

EMILY YEOMANS, CO-CHIEF EXECUTIVE, EEF



TWEET TALK

@ndnataalk.bsky.social
A huge congratulations from everyone at NDNA to former Chair of Trustees, Sarah Steel, who was awarded an OBE for services to early education in the King's Birthday Honours List.

@edupolicyinst.bsky.social
Young learners in England are facing a deepening crisis. Our Annual Report shows that disadvantaged five-year-olds are falling further behind their peers – and for children with SEND, the learning gap has widened to over 20 months, the widest gap on record: bit.ly/4lvfqSE

Mixed opinions

77%

RESPONDENTS TO TAPESTRY'S 2025 SURVEY WHO FEEL THEIR ROLE IS REWARDING; HOWEVER, 75% DESCRIBE IT AS CHALLENGING AND 74% FEEL THEIR WORKLOAD IS TOO HIGH. LEARN MORE AT TINYURL.COM/TEYTPSRV



“There’s £65 million that has yet to be distributed to providers, and of that, there is more than £44 million unaccounted for.”

TIM MCLACHLAN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, NDNA

Writing slump

A National Literacy Trust survey of 115,000 children has shown a deepening disengagement from writing, which now ranks as the lowest-performing area in national assessments.

Research shows that funding is failing to reach providers

A new analysis of government funding by NDNA has revealed that millions of pounds allocated to support early years providers are yet to reach their intended target. The money in question was supposed to create additional places to meet demand for the childcare expansion, but a Freedom of Information request has revealed that of the Early Years Expansion Grant’s £75 million plus, announced in December 2024, less than a third had been distributed by councils as of early August 2025. Similarly, just half of the earlier Childcare Expansion Capital Grant’s £100 million had made it to providers, despite having reached councils in February 2024. Councils reported that some 10% of the former and 57% of the latter would still not have made it to providers by the start of September.

“It’s a shocking state of affairs that millions of pounds of money made available for nurseries to be able to increase their capacity for the childcare expansion has still not been paid out – eighteen months after councils have received it in some cases,” said Tim McLachlan, NDNA’s chief executive. “When the government looks at the Early Years funding review as part of the Best Start in Life strategy, it needs to find a way to simplify the system for families, councils and providers to avoid these types of underspends.”

Also of note is the fact that those councils that had distributed funding told NDNA that 33% of the Childcare Expansion Capital Grant and nearly 9% of the Early Years Expansion Grant had been given to school-based providers: NDNA notes that this is a disproportionately high figure, given that school-based providers deliver around 6% of funded places to two-year-olds and under-tuos, according to figures in the latest Early Years Providers report.



PAY MUST RISE

Against the backdrop of the expansion of the free childcare entitlement, analysis by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has highlighted the recruitment and retention challenges the sector faces, despite a recent growth in staff numbers. It suggests that low pay is a major factor: while they have risen recently in relative terms, early years pay levels remain lower than in the general workforce and among similar workers. Related to this, the NFER also points to poor career progression opportunities within the early years workforce, and has called on the government to increase funding rates to counter the problem.

200k

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“This is a plan to transform early education”

The government's blueprint for the sector is ambitious, but ministers must deliver on their promises...



IN JULY 2025, THE GOVERNMENT PUBLISHED Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life, a three-year, £1.5 billion plan to transform early years education, childcare, and family services in England. Its core ambition is for 75% of five-year-olds to reach a good level of development by 2028. This is a key document for all of us working in the early years, as it's the policy and political blueprint for how we will deliver our services for the next three years.

Labour wants to put the future of children at the heart of its government plan. Having seen the Institute for Fiscal Studies' findings that children living near Sure Start centres had better outcomes at ages 7, 11, and 16, higher GCSE scores, lower school absence, fewer hospitalisations or need for SEND services, and fewer mental health challenges, it's unsurprising that they have introduced a similar, though more slimline, version called Best Start Family Hubs. This is a plan for 1,000 Family Hubs focusing on disadvantaged communities, with at least one per local authority by April 2026. The hubs will offer parenting classes, stay-and-play sessions, SEN support, referrals to housing, employment and health services, and a new digital parenting platform to provide guidance from pregnancy to school entry. Alongside them, there will be a national database linking the hubs with Wes Streeting's neighbourhood health centres to proactively identify vulnerable children.

EXPANSION AND INSPECTION

I probably don't need to rehearse the expansion of the 30-hour entitlement for working parents starting in September and the targeted drive to increase take-up of 15-hour entitlements, particularly for two-year-olds, children with SEND, and those in care. There is also a plan for more Early Years Pupil Premium in high-need areas.

For the first time, a government strategy has recognised that a mix of private, charitable, and social enterprise providers are credible market partners, key to sustainability and equity. Come April 2026, Ofsted will inspect all providers within a four-year cycle, and I'm pleased to see all new providers will be inspected within 18 months.

The strategy is strong on language and literacy

There are mixed feelings across the sector about the plan for 200 school-based nurseries, scaling to 300 to create 6,000 places. Many of us remember when the Sure Start expansion produced new, shiny, cheaper nurseries right next to small, local, established nurseries, which then closed. But when Sure Start closed, it left no provision in many poor or rural neighbourhoods. So, stewarding the market takes long-sightedness!

INVESTING IN STAFF

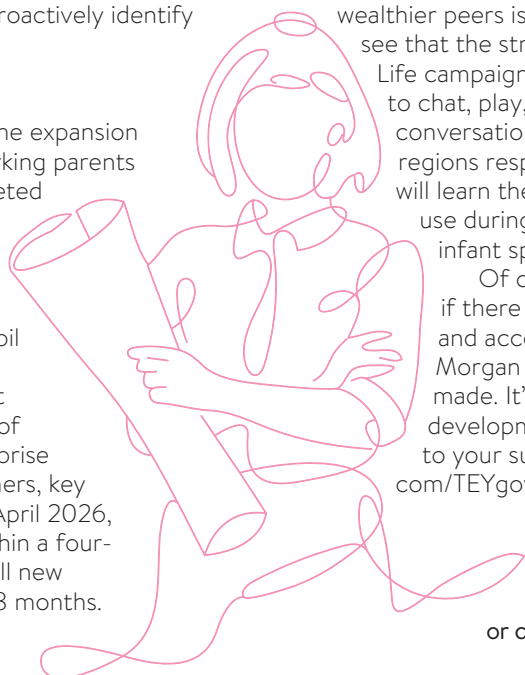
Of course, these plans won't translate without well-trained staff. Therefore, we're promised £400 million over three years to provide £4,500 tax-free incentives for 3,000 early years teachers in 20 of the most disadvantaged areas, establish an Early Years Professional register, and establish career frameworks and funded training places, including SEND workforce support and resources. Is this enough to address the low quality of many training providers and increase pay and conditions?

There is much talk about Good Level of Development (GLD), along with school readiness, a much-contested concept. The strategy focus is strong on language and literacy. No one will disagree that language development is a key to children's success and that the 16-month vocabulary gap that exists between children in poverty and their wealthier peers is unacceptable. It's therefore useful to see that the strategy aligns with the NHS Start for Life campaign. This is designed to encourage parents to chat, play, read, and recognise the power of conversation-rich environments to activate the brain regions responsible for language. Hopefully they will learn the importance of reducing their phone use during routines, which correlates with 16% less infant speech.

Of course, all of this will count for nothing if there are no measurable commitments and accountability, so the ministers (Stephen Morgan MP is ours) must deliver on the promises made. It's important to be informed about these developments, as it could make all the difference to your sustainability – find out more at tinyurl.com/TEYgovBSL



June O'Sullivan OBE is the CEO of the London Early Years Foundation. Visit juneosullivan.com or connect on X @JuneOSullivan



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NEIL LEITCH IS CEO OF THE EARLY YEARS ALLIANCE

“We need a whole new system”

Those who need high-quality education the most are missing out, says Neil Leitch...

A year ago, I would have said the sector was feeling cautiously hopeful that with a new government in place, substantial change was coming. And while it would be wrong to say nothing has improved during those 12 months, the truth is we're still a long way away from where many of us had hoped we'd be.

Credit where it's due: the publication of the Best Start in Life strategy was incredibly welcome, and as an organisation, we at the Alliance were pleased to see several measures that have the potential to improve conditions for early years settings and our all-important educators. But, as is so often the case with government policy, the devil will be in the detail, and it remains to be seen whether the positive rhetoric will be matched by the necessary substance to make these improvements a reality.

The government's mission to “break down barriers to opportunity” is undoubtedly a good one in principle, but as things stand for the sector – between chronic underfunding, the impact of increased National Insurance contributions, and the severe recruitment and retention crisis – and despite the unrelenting commitment of providers to deliver the best start in life for each and every child, the fact is that it's becoming increasingly difficult for settings to keep their doors open, let alone offer fair and equal opportunities to all families.

What's more, given the current shape of early years policy in this country,

I have to ask: how likely is it that we will ever truly break down barriers to opportunity within the existing early years system?

It is widely accepted that the first five years of a child's life are critical for their long-term learning and development. It's no exaggeration to say that getting it right for a child in their early years can change their whole life. Why is it, then, that early entitlements, and almost all current offers, are targeted at “working families”? Early years is an integral part of the education system, as the government has rightly recognised it to be by creating the role of Minister for Early Education – and yet, we all know that if what was written on a parent's wage slip determined access to primary or secondary education, there would be a public outcry. But somehow, in the case of early years education, this is deemed normal.

Just last month, the New Economics Foundation published a report showing that of the households included in their research, only 11% of the poorest households will be eligible for the full expanded hours

compared to 85% of the richest households. Meanwhile, the latest Department for Education statistics show that the number of two-year-olds registered for the disadvantaged early entitlement is down almost 20% from 2024, making it the lowest uptake in the statistical series. Added to this, the Education Policy Institute recently found evidence of growing attainment gaps in early years education, particularly for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, noting that 40% of the gap at age 16 has already emerged by age five.

Clearly, without a significant change of approach, early years policy is at risk of embedding, rather than tackling, inequality.

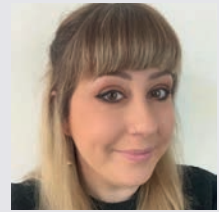
There is a wealth of research showing that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds stand to gain the most from access to quality early education and care. It is incumbent upon the government, therefore, to ensure its policies are centred around those children and families who stand to benefit the most, rather than exacerbating the disadvantage gaps we are already seeing across the early education system. This means more than just making ad hoc improvements to the current system. It means imagining a whole new system.

I've seen first-hand how high-quality early years provision helps to build character, to instil confidence and create self-belief. I believe every child deserves the opportunity to benefit from this – but unless we are willing to rethink our entire approach to early years access, these barriers to opportunity risk growing increasingly difficult to break down.

Visit eyalliance.org.uk



Illuminating Possibilities: The Power of Light in Early Years Education



Kindly written for Hope
by Sophie Pallash Shaikh
Pedagogy Coach at LEYF

A recent professional retreat led me to a moment of personal and professional revelation: how deeply light, its presence, its playfulness, and its absence, shapes our experiences from early childhood through to adulthood.

I was fortunate to attend a three-day training session for Alice Sharp's Fabulous Fascinations Retreat at the breathtaking Caer Beris Manor in Builth Wells, Wales, in partnership with Hope Education. The atmosphere was electric from the start: a warm welcome, a shared sense of purpose, and a passionate group of educators devoted to improving Early Years experiences.

The sessions were designed to delight the senses and challenge our perspectives. Through immersive workshops, we reflected deeply on what we offer children and how a simple shift in approach or environment can reframe their entire learning experience.

Hope Education's resources were displayed with such care and creativity that it felt like stepping into Aladdin's cave. As I engaged with them, I was reminded of the sensory magic children feel when stepping into well-designed nursery spaces, where thoughtful provocations spark curiosity, joy, and awe. These moments embody the heart of cultural capital and demonstrate why teaching and experiences matter so profoundly.

Returning from the retreat brimming with inspiration, I turned my focus inward, to our own training offering at the London Institute of Early Years, part of the London Early Years Foundation. As a Pedagogy Coach, I asked myself: Were we truly embracing the creative potential of light? Do we harness its full range of potential for imaginative play, exploration, and cross-curricular learning?

Light play offers children endless ways to explore science, art, and storytelling. From crafting dioramas to experimenting with shadows and designing mixed-media installations, children learn how light behaves and how they can manipulate it to express and understand the world around them.

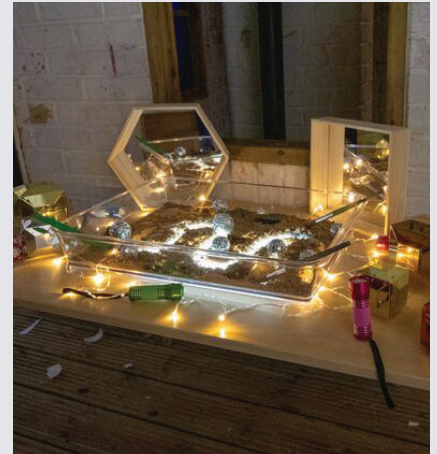
Hands-On Inspiration: Lighting the Way with Hope Education

As the journey to enrich our curriculum with light-based provocations would begin through targeted training, my first port of call was clear...Hope Education. I knew that carefully selected resources could ignite a deeper curiosity and drive to explore in both educators and children alike.

Hope Education did not disappoint. Each item selected was chosen to inspire investigation, encourage hypothesis-building, a testing of one's own ideas and nurture a spirit of playful experimentation. From light trays, colour rods, light and shadow kits to rainbow torches, the possibilities felt limitless.

I envisioned how these resources would be used not just in training, but in hands-on experiences across our nursery settings. The idea that these resources could travel between sites, supporting educators through role-modelling setups and sparking rich pedagogical conversations, felt like a new beginning in our playfulness with light.

Ultimately, our role as educators is to kindle wonder. Light is more than illumination, it's a tool for thinking, dreaming, and becoming. By offering children experiences rooted in beauty and curiosity, we don't just teach, we transform!



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

HOW TO SPEAK CHILD

Physical contact

WHAT DO YOU LIKE WHEN GROWN-UPS TALK TO YOU?

"When I'm sad I like to hug. Nanny lets me climb on her, but Daddy doesn't like it."

F. (Female)

I have been debating whether or not to tackle this issue, as I realise it can be contentious, but I feel it's important enough to take the risk.

My own childhood took place through the 60s and 70s, and the reason I experienced little physical contact with parents or teachers probably had more to do with historical "English reserve" and a still-prevalent feeling that children should be seen, not heard, and only touched when absolutely necessary than today's concerns about safeguarding. Of course, safeguarding is an issue to be taken extremely seriously; however, it can be hard for a naturally tactile child such as F to understand any rejection.

The prevalence of screens is leading to increased isolation

In certain classrooms, I well remember finding myself with what I used to call "child trousers" as little ones clung to my legs either for comfort or fun. It can be a tricky situation in which to find oneself – not wanting to engender any anxiety in children who are still young enough to be behaving purely instinctually, but also needing to comply with guidelines. After all, at the same time as wanting to instil an awareness of self-protection in our children, we are also living in a time when the prevalence of screens and individual devices is leading to increased isolation – and then there's the aftermath of Covid, whose effects are still having an impact, even on those who were merely babes in arms at the time.

Young children are physical beings, and humans are social animals who need contact with each other. It's difficult to develop a true sense of self within the body, and to have a positive relationship with our own corporeal selves, without experiencing how our bodies interact with others. You may have children in your class who have been brought up in other cultures that are much more at home with physical contact and who, even more than F, would be confused by having behaviour that is so natural at home curtailed at school.

So what's the solution? Well, there's always safety in

numbers, and as long as someone else is around, I personally don't see anything wrong with giving a child a hug when they need it – in fact I'm pro – and of course there's nothing wrong with children developing their knowledge of their bodily selves with one another, as long as no one gets hurt!

There's something wonderful about the moment when you take your children into the hall for a dance or movement session and the first thing they want to do is run round and round in a big circle. It's often good to let them burn off that big-space excitement for a short while. One time I was doing just that, standing in the centre of the circle, ready to call proceedings to order when needed, and I caught the eye of one little girl beaming with joy as she ran and ran, for the sheer fun of it. In response, I mumbled something like, "Why? Why always this?" The little girl heard and yelled back at me, "It's because we need to!" Movement sessions like this can be vital in developing children's physical sense of self and the boundaries they are comfortable with.

Returning to F, I apportion no blame to her daddy; we all have different preferences in this area (an aversion to contact may be particularly noticeable in some of your children with SEN), but for those to whom it is important, it's well worth introducing games and activities for your charges that reinforce the basic desire to have physical contact with each other.

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

LEARN MORE

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



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



Join her Facebook page at facebook.com/Howtospeakchild





GEORGINA YOUNG IS FOUNDER OF THE YOUNG ONES CHILDMINDING

“We’re not just babysitters!”

The vital work of childminders and the wider early years sector seldom receives the recognition it deserves, but that doesn’t diminish its impact, says Georgina Young...

We’ve all heard it, haven’t we? Sometimes whispered under the breath. Sometimes said to our faces.

Sometimes posted online by strangers who’ve never set foot in an early years setting. “They’re just babysitters.”

I remember reading a thread on a parenting forum – a discussion about early years options – where someone boldly declared that childminders weren’t as safe, skilled or educated as nursery staff. That we were the “lesser” choice. It stayed with me, not because it was true but because it’s so common. But I’m not *just* anything. None of us are. We aren’t *just* wiping noses or watching the clock. We’re not *just* filling time until school starts. We’re not *just* there. We are the safe base, the trusted grown-up, the first teacher, the calm in someone else’s storm. We are doing some of the most important work there is, and we do it with knowledge, intention and love.

The truth is it probably won’t be the last time we hear it. Every time it happens, it’s a reminder of how much work we still have to do to shift the narrative – to speak up, stand together, and show the world what this profession truly is. Because we are not babysitters. We are educators. We are nurturers. We are highly trained professionals doing complex, skilled, emotionally demanding work – work that forms the foundation of everything that follows in a child’s life.

THIS WORK HAS WEIGHT

We carry far more than clipboards and crayons. We carry stories, worries, milestones, and moments. We carry a responsibility that’s hard to describe:

to keep children safe, to help them feel seen, to lay the groundwork for confidence, compassion and curiosity. It’s a quiet kind of weight, mostly invisible to the outside world. But it’s there, in our posture, in our planning, in our hearts.

We show up every day with this weight and with love. I remember a morning when my own children had been under the weather. I’d barely slept, and my body ached from the demands of motherhood, work and life. But I still rose early, set out our learning environment with thought, love and passion; still smiled as I opened the door, and gave every child the love and support they needed that day to thrive. Because I knew those children walking through it needed me. They may not be my children, but I care for them as if they are.

“There’s no payslip for the emotional availability we offer

I know I’m not alone in that. Across homes, nurseries, classrooms and settings, thousands of early years professionals do the same, showing up on hard days, in hard seasons, carrying their own challenges silently so they can be a steady, loving presence for someone else’s child. That is not babysitting. That is commitment. That is heart work.

TEACHING THAT MATTERS

People often ask, “But what do you actually teach them?” We teach them that they belong. That their voice

matters. That the world is worth exploring. We teach patience and problem-solving through puzzles and pouring. We teach language through stories, songs, and soft conversation at snack time. We teach science through puddles and seasons, kindness through turn-taking, and resilience through falling down and getting up again.

The learning we facilitate isn’t always loud, but it is layered. It’s grounded in child development, attachment theory, observation, and professional reflection, setting children up for a lifelong love of learning. In my setting, I once watched a child spend days transporting stones from one side of the garden to the other. Many would see aimless play. But I saw a transporting schema emerging. I saw focus, purpose, pattern. I extended it – baskets, water, weighing scales, tools, books. That’s not filling time. That’s building neural pathways.

We teach with intention. We teach with joy. And we teach with a depth that too often goes unrecognised.

AN UNSEEN IMPACT

What’s harder to explain – and maybe what makes our work so often overlooked – is how much of it lives beneath the surface. No one sees us resetting the room long after the children go home. Or the mental load of remembering who likes their toast cut in triangles, who has a speech referral coming, who’s struggling with drop-offs because of things happening at home. No one sees us on our knees, mopping up a puddle while singing “Wind the Bobbin Up”. Or how many conversations we’ve had with worried parents in car parks, in whispers, in tears. There’s no payslip



for the emotional availability we offer. No bonus for the regulation we lend to children when they can't yet find it in themselves. But it's there. And it matters.

SUPPORT FOR SOCIETY

The early years sector is not a luxury; it's the backbone of the working world. We are the reason parents can return to work. We are the reason children start school with the confidence to thrive. We are the reason countless families feel held, seen, and supported during some of the most tender years of their lives. And yet, we remain one of the most misunderstood and underfunded professions in the country.

Early years policy changes hands like a game of political hot potato, but the impact always lands in our laps. Across the sector, the pressure is mounting. Pay rarely reflects the responsibility. Paperwork piles up. Expectations grow. And still, we show up.

For childminders, I know that invisibility can feel especially heavy. Many do it solo, often with little support, and yet we are still framed as the "cheaper" or "easier" option. Having walked the path from nurseries to childminder, I've seen how differently the roles are perceived, and how wrongly those assumptions are made. That journey has only deepened



my respect for the resilience and professionalism across our sector – the kind of strength that speaks even when the world isn't listening, and that deserves to be seen, valued, and celebrated.

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

This is the story of a sector that quietly changes lives, one moment, one meal, one morning at a time. It's every educator who has crouched down to make eye contact with a crying child. Every key person who has stayed up late thinking of ideas for their little ones. Every childminder who opened early or late because another family was relying on them. Every nursery team who's worked short-staffed but still made magic happen.

We may work in different settings,



but we share a mission: to give children what they need to feel loved, to feel capable, to feel ready. So no, we are not babysitters. We are educators. We are professionals. We are essential. And the ripples of what we do today – in the play, in the patience, in the quiet holding – will echo through generations to come.

We are not babysitters. We are educators. We are professionals. We are essential. And the ripples of what we do today – in the play, in the patience, in the quiet holding – will echo through generations to come.

Read more from Georgina at Guiding The Young Ones – visit [earlyyears.blog](https://www.earlyyears.blog)



MICHELLE WINDRIDGE IS THE NATIONAL EDUCATION LEAD FOR SCHOOL-BASED EYF

A world of play

Michelle Windridge explores three influential approaches to play-based learning from across the globe...

Play is a universal language. From sandpits in Sydney to forest dens in Scandinavia, children across the world learn, explore, and express themselves through play. While cultural traditions and pedagogical models vary, there is increasing global consensus that play is essential for early childhood development.

In the UK, educators frequently look beyond borders to draw inspiration from international models of play-based learning. As the early years sector evolves to meet the complex needs of today's children, these global insights can help to inform more holistic, child-centred practice. So, pop on your imaginary explorer's hat, pack your curiosity, and let's globe-trot through the playful pedagogies shaping early years practice worldwide.

1 SCANDINAVIA: NATURE AS THE THIRD TEACHER

Scandinavian countries, particularly Finland, Sweden and Norway, have long been regarded as trailblazers in early childhood education. Central to their approach is *friluftsliv* (open-air living), a cultural commitment to outdoor life, which is embedded in forest school models. In Norway *barnehager* (kindergartens) often take

place entirely outdoors, whatever the weather. Children climb trees, build shelters, and cook on open fires. The emphasis is not on preparing children for formal learning but on nurturing independence, problem-solving, and resilience through unstructured exploration.

This ethos has grown in popularity in the UK, where forest school initiatives have flourished in recent years. Practitioners inspired by Scandinavian models are increasingly weaving outdoor learning into their curriculum, using nature to support children's emotional regulation, physical development, and social collaboration. However, despite good intentions, outdoor learning in the UK is still often treated as an "add-on" rather than an integral part of a child's daily experience, particularly once a child starts school. This may be due to curriculum pressures, logistical challenges, or perhaps because the deep-rooted cultural value placed on being outdoors, so evident in Scandinavian countries, is not yet as firmly embedded in UK society.

A 2021 study by Harris (bit.ly/3JeZxtj) found that children in forest school settings displayed increased confidence, empathy and wellbeing, benefits that echo those seen in Nordic countries for decades. This research suggests that it is essential that we continue to challenge the barriers, whether practical, cultural or curricular, that stand in the way of fully embracing outdoor learning.

2 REGGIO EMILIA, ITALY: THE HUNDRED LANGUAGES OF CHILDREN

Early years education in Italy continues to reflect a deeply embedded respect for children as capable, active



participants in their own learning, a philosophy most notably exemplified in the world-renowned Reggio Emilia approach. While the approach began in the town of Reggio Emilia after the Second World War, its principles have influenced early childhood provision more widely across Italy, especially in preschools (*scuole dell'infanzia*) for children aged three to six.

Today, many Italian early years settings, whether formally Reggio-inspired or not, favour environments that support expressive, inquiry-led learning. Classrooms often resemble studios more than traditional learning spaces, filled with open-ended materials that invite exploration, collaboration, and creative thinking.

“International models offer a treasure trove of ideas and inspiration

Children are encouraged to express themselves through multiple modes, what founder Loris Malaguzzi called “the hundred languages of children”, including drawing, sculpture, music, movement, and imaginative play.

Educators in Italy work in close partnership with children, observing their interests, documenting their thinking, and designing projects that emerge from real-life encounters or questions posed by the children themselves. This project-based, relational approach fosters not only cognitive development but also social understanding, empathy, and a sense of belonging.

In the UK, the Reggio Emilia philosophy continues to inspire early years educators, particularly in the use of documentation to make children’s learning visible. A report by the British Early Childhood Education Research Association (*Documenting Children’s Learning: Reflective Practices in Early Years Settings*, 2022) highlighted the growing number of UK settings adopting reflective, child-led practices rooted in listening, observation, and co-construction of learning. However,

this vision is not without its challenges. With growing demands on the early years sector and the government’s narrative increasingly centred around “school readiness”, there is a risk that narrow definitions of progress may overshadow broader developmental goals. The pressure to prepare children for formal schooling, often interpreted through a lens of early literacy and numeracy benchmarks, can sit uncomfortably alongside more holistic, inquiry-based approaches. As such, creating the conditions for deep, meaningful learning in the spirit of Italian pedagogy may require not only pedagogical commitment, but also a wider cultural and policy shift in how we value early childhood.

3 JAPAN: MASTERING PLAY WITH PURPOSE

Japan offers a unique blend of structure and spontaneity in early years education. While play is deeply valued, it often coexists with strong routines and expectations around social behaviour. One striking example is the emphasis on *kansei*, the cultivation of aesthetic sensibilities and emotional intelligence.

Japanese kindergartens (*yochien*) frequently feature dramatic play areas and artistic pursuits that support children in recognising and managing emotions, working harmoniously in groups, and appreciating beauty in their surroundings.

The Japanese approach also offers a valuable example of how to strike a balance between free play and group-led activities, an area that many UK practitioners continue to navigate with difficulty amid curriculum and accountability pressures. Questions like “How much adult-led time is too much?” or “Will children be ready for Year One if we don’t start phasing out play by the end of Reception?” reflect the real tensions faced in practice.

Ask any early years educator in the UK about the importance of play, and you’re likely to hear a passionate, heartfelt response in its favour. However, when it comes to finding the right balance between child-initiated play and adult-led learning, opinions often diverge. The debate around how best to structure the early years remains complex and shaped as much by policy expectations as by

pedagogical beliefs.

Recent research by Uchida et al. has highlighted how Japan’s early years system successfully blends play with adult-led learning, fostering both individual creativity and a strong sense of group responsibility (2025, bit.ly/3JkeFFE). Their findings suggest there is still much the UK can learn from Japan’s thoughtful balance between child-initiated exploration and structured guidance.

BE INSPIRED

As the UK continues to evolve its early years pedagogy, international models offer a treasure trove of ideas and inspiration. While no single approach offers a universal solution, weaving together the threads of global play pedagogy allows for a richer, more inclusive, and more responsive early childhood experience.

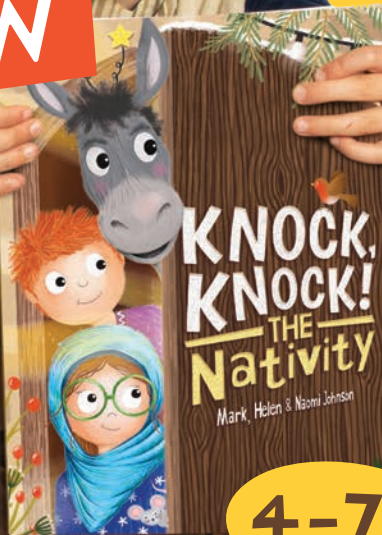
In the words of Loris Malaguzzi, “Nothing without joy.” And in that spirit, let us continue to learn from our global neighbours and nurture joyful, playful, and meaningful early learning experiences for every child.

KEY LEARNINGS

- **Trust the child:** across cultures, effective play-based learning trusts in children’s innate drive to explore and make sense of the world through play.
- **Environment matters:** whether in forests or classrooms, the learning environment is a critical “teacher” in supporting agency and curiosity.
- **Documentation as reflection:** observing, recording, and reflecting on children’s play supports deeper understanding and more responsive teaching.
- **Balance freedom and structure:** purposeful play doesn’t mean a lack of planning; global approaches show that structure can coexist with spontaneity.

WHO'S
THERE?

NEW



4-7s

A simple, smiley,
celebration of
a nativity!

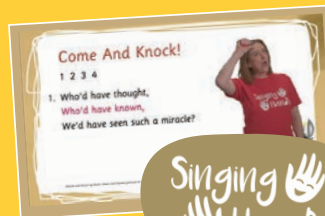
KNOCK, KNOCK! THE Nativity

AT A GLANCE

AGE RANGE	SONGS	DURATION	SPEAKING PARTS	MAKATON SIGNING
4-7	7	25 MINS	41	ALL SONGS



FROM THE WRITERS
WHO BROUGHT YOU...



Singing
Hands



outoftheark.co.uk/knock

NEW

I Spy a new songbook for EYFS... 13 songs, 13 games and a WHOLE load of fun!

Ready, Steady, Play!

Words On
Screen™

Lyrics and
instructions

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Can't Keep Still
Crossing The River
Ready, Steady, Throw!
I Spy!
Marvellous Machine
Rhythm And Run
Together-Gether!
Postie! Postie!
Playground Ceilidh
Mirror My Moves
North, East, South, West
Simon Says
The Conga Song!

3-7s

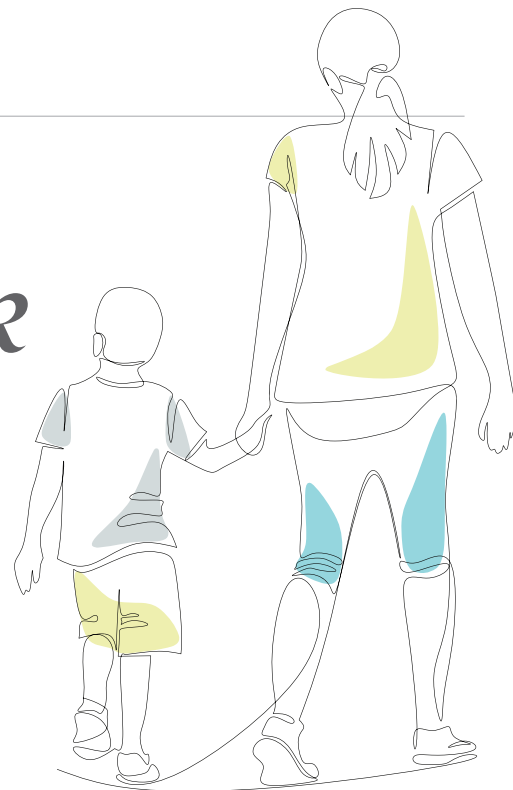




SARAH HOLMES IS AN EARLY YEARS TEACHER

It's time to rethink home visits

Better outcomes can be achieved by meeting families where they are, says Sarah Holmes...



I love home visits. I've always felt incredibly fortunate to be welcomed into the homes of our new families. However, I've come to realise that, too often, these visits are shaped around what the setting needs: what we *think* we need to tell families and what we *think* we need to find out. There's a risk that home visits can simply transmit information and become more of a tick list than a conversation, serving the setting more than the child and their family.

There are two key tensions at the heart of traditional home visits. First, as educators, we arrive with the weight of the institution behind us. We may not intend to wield power, but it's there – in our job titles and our roles. Second, we each bring our own biases. Shaped by our life experiences, values, and expectations, we may unconsciously make judgements about a home.

One way to address these issues is to reconsider the space in which we meet families. What happens when we step outside the home to share experiences together?

BEYOND THE HOME

Children's lives aren't contained just in their home and setting; instead they're lived in parks, community centres, shops, and streets. These offer rich opportunities to meet children and families in more neutral environments where our attention can be drawn to something previously hidden or overlooked.

I've found that informal spaces like parks or cafes can gently flatten the hierarchy. When we're not sitting in someone's living room with a folder in hand, the tone of the interaction shifts. Conversations can flow more easily. There's more space for play, laughter, and observation. At times, we can also step back and allow space for children

and families to take the lead. My recent guide, *Rethinking Home Visits*, provides more suggestions for reflection.

WALKING WITH CHILDREN

Recently, I explored another valuable alternative: walking with children and families from home to the setting. This simple act flipped the dynamic.

We need to treat transition as a process

The child became the guide, leading me along their route, showing me the world from their perspective. I was the learner, and they were the expert. It was a joyful, revealing process and gave me a wealth of insights about them, their family and the wider community, including:

- What caught the child's attention on the way to nursery
- Who walked with them (siblings, cousins, extended family)
- What their neighbourhood looked, sounded, and felt like

It also offered much more relaxed, natural opportunities to talk with families as we walked together.

DON'T STOP AT ONE

It is easy to treat transition as a single home visit, before a child starts. Instead, we need to rethink transition as a process that unfolds across weeks and months, in many forms and places. It may start with a traditional home visit, but it's worth returning to it later in the year.

Here are some questions we find helpful in our setting:

- Do we know all children equally well, or are there some who we know less well? Why is this? What can we do to address it?
- How confident are we that our families understand our setting and feel they are understood and have a sense of belonging?
- How have we built relationships with parents and carers and a child's wider family?
- What do we really know about the community we serve? How can our setting form stronger links?

Midway through the year is also a good time to consider how families engaged with our initial transition process. Who was unable to access home visits or settling-in sessions? What barriers did they experience? Did we offer alternative options?

BEING WHERE FAMILIES ARE

Forging connections between a setting and families isn't a one-size-fits-all experience! Nor does it need to happen at home, or take place just once. Repeated visits *after* relationships have been established open up new opportunities for shared experiences, renewed relationships and collaboration between settings and communities. If we reimagine home visits as opportunities for connection rather than just information collection, we can create a space for deeper, more respectful relationships.

You can access Sarah's guide, *Rethinking Home Visits*, produced in partnership with Tapestry, the childhood education platform, at tapestry.info/revisiting-home-visits



SAMANTHA MARTIN-BEAGLE IS A PROGRAMME LEAD AT VOICE 21

“Oracy underpins learning”

Affording young children plentiful opportunities to speak, listen, and communicate will give them a boost that lasts a lifetime, says Samantha Martin-Beagle...

High-quality oracy provision is more important now than ever, and like many essential life skills, its roots are firmly planted in the early years. Children make sense of the world, build relationships, and express themselves through dialogue, and it underpins all seven areas of learning and development.

At Voice 21, we view oracy as a vital part of development for *all* children. We define oracy as the ability to articulate ideas, develop understanding, and engage with others through speaking, listening and communication. Research by the Oracy Education Commission updated this definition to include *communication* explicitly, acknowledging that talk is not the only form of interaction. This inclusive approach ensures oracy celebrates all voices and empowers every child to participate fully in their learning.

SUPPORTING ORACY

Children with strong early oracy skills are more likely to succeed later academically and socially. A high-quality oracy education in the early years can support literacy outcomes at KS2 and have a positive impact on their life chances as adults. It can also improve a child's experience of education, allowing them to find more enjoyment and motivation at school.

Supporting oracy in EYFS means creating authentic and varied opportunities for children to speak,

listen, and communicate. Through these interactions, children begin to develop a strong sense of identity, learn social routines, and build the foundational skills that will support their learning for life.

Often the emphasis in EYFS is on teaching children *to talk*, yet oracy includes a broader set of communication skills even from the very start.

THE ORACY FRAMEWORK

The Oracy Framework (tinyurl.com/TEYV211) helps teachers to plan a high-quality oracy education. It was created by Voice 21 and Oracy Cambridge and breaks oracy down into specific teachable skills linking to the physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social and emotional development of children.

Voice 21 works with a national network of early years settings, supporting practitioners to identify how to apply these skills to age-related expectations for spoken language development in their provision.

Children naturally mirror the behaviours of the adults around them. Since many children spend most of their week in EYFS settings, it is crucial that practitioners reflect on how they

use their voice, body language and speech to teach and model skills from the Oracy Framework. Why not try out these engaging activities inspired by the Oracy Framework in your own setting?

- Read stories with your whole body: sit, stand, play with your tone, volume, and pitch and incorporate gestures.
- Introduce new vocabulary in fun, engaging ways to make it memorable; sing songs, use actions and images, and create repetition by incorporating the words across the provision.
- Stretch children's imagination with talk in different contexts, for different purposes and to varied audiences. Encourage curiosity with sentences such as, "I wonder what would happen if...?"
- Encourage self-expression by making space for personality to shine through their talk.

INTERACTIONS WITH ADULTS

It's easy to think that great early years provision is dependent on an abundance of resources or exciting activities. But it is *responsive, attuned* adults who make the biggest difference in helping children develop strong oracy skills.

Children enter our settings having had exposure to a range of experiences and opportunities that develop language and communication. To support *all* pupils, adults can create opportunities for oracy by intentionally planning meaningful contexts for back-and-forth interactions. These early conversations lay the groundwork for thinking, language, and learning.

One way to generate dialogue is through Sustained Shared Thinking (tinyurl.com/TEYV212) where adults and children solve problems or explore ideas together. This can happen during everyday moments like finding a lost jumper or planning snack time and turns routine tasks into valuable oracy opportunities.

For example, if a child wants to eat their snack outside but the adult notices it is likely to rain, the adult could model their thinking out loud and invite the child to help find a solution: "What a fantastic idea! Have you thought about how we can stay warm and dry while we're outside?"

Stretch children's imagination with talk in different contexts

DELIBERATE TALK

To make sustained shared thinking effective, identify a problem, encourage ideas and solutions, stretch and encourage children's thinking when challenges arise, and celebrate their efforts. Voice 21's Talk Tactics for Early Language Development were designed as a scaffold to support practitioners to help deepen thinking and expand talking. Children, particularly those with additional needs, thrive when vocabulary and sentence structures are repeated by all staff throughout the provision. The resource is designed to be used in spontaneous conversations as well as structured areas of the timetable.

Ensure that your staff understand why the different tactics are useful for enhancing oracy and that they are confident applying them in practice. This way children are treated like capable thinkers, and they will grow in confidence and independence through meaningful conversations in a safe, supportive space.

Modelling and planning oracy intentionally can and should happen in all areas of the provision. When opportunities are authentic to the child, it supports them to develop not only language but also the ability to think deeply and reflect. The following oracy-rich interaction was recorded at a Voice 21 Oracy School in a Reception classroom where the children were in free play in the outdoor area.

Practitioner A joins the child at the water tray, crouches next to the child and uses gestures to point and indicate motion.

X, can I play with you? What an amazing waterslide you've made for your cars! I'm sending them down the slide quick. I wonder if the slide with more bubbles will make the car go faster or slower. Faster!

You were right, the higher slide with more bubbles was a lot quicker. The car went very fast.

It's because it's really slippery.

Do you think the higher slide will be quicker than the lower slide?

Yeah, we can put more bubbles on it. What would happen if we made the slide higher?

Then cars would zoom down the slide really quickly.

You said it would go faster, but what would happen if we used the dry slide?

Yeah, but I like the bubbles because it makes them really fast.

I'd like to know more about how you made them go so fast.

Here we see how practitioner A is responsive and attuned. *Physically*, they get down on the child's level to make eye contact and actively listen, creating a meaningful interaction. *Linguistically*, they comment rather than question, and repeat new vocabulary. *Cognitively*, the practitioner challenges their thinking by using the talk tactics of build, challenge, stretch and speculate. *Socially and emotionally*, they ensure they have the child's attention, follow their lead and model turn-taking.

What could high-quality oracy look like in your provision?

FURTHER READING

- Hear from our Voice 21 Oracy schools: tinyurl.com/TEYV213
- Read our Ten Years of Impact report: tinyurl.com/TEYV214
- Listen to the Oracy Education Commission's podcast: tinyurl.com/TEYV215

3... 2... 1... READY FOR LIFT-OFF

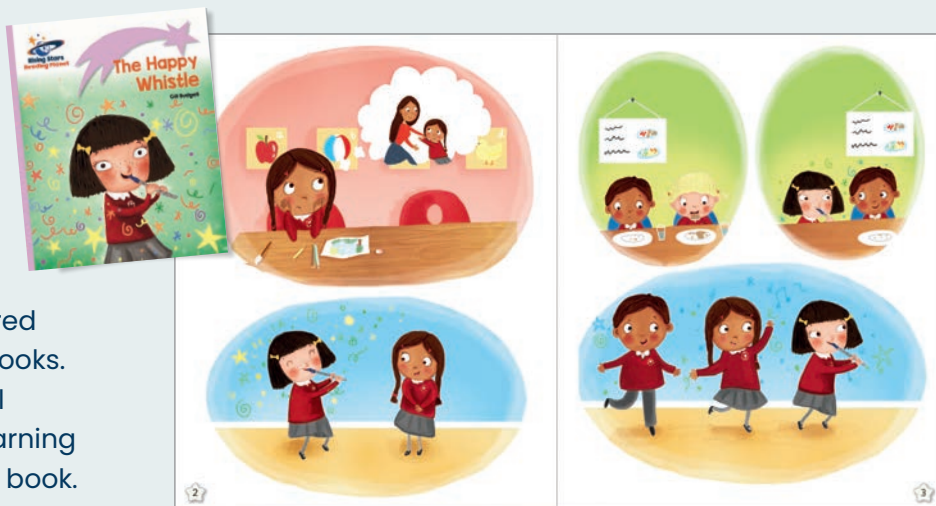


Launch young learners into their reading journey, developing essential early language skills.



Letters & Sounds Phase 1

Develop early vocabulary and communication skills through paired **wordless** fiction and non-fiction books. Encourage young learners to retell stories in their own words while learning the technical skills of navigating a book.



Letters & Sounds Phases 1-2

Explore the concept of **blending and segmenting** with Lift-off First Word books. Bridge the gap between wordless books and first sentences using simple words to explore familiar stories.



Our Reception teacher is **very enthusiastic** about the wordless and the first word books.

Headteacher, Tranmoor Primary School



Build a strong foundation for literacy, focusing on **oral communication** and **phonemic awareness**, introducing letter-sounds in the order of natural speech development.





DANIEL SATURLEY IS AN EARLY YEARS ADVISORY TEACHER

Let's get dads more involved

Daniel Saturley takes a personal look at welcoming fathers into early years settings...

Engaging fathers is important. Most of us want to be involved, but sometimes we don't quite know how to fit into the world of early years settings. I speak from experience, both as a dad and as someone who works in the sector. Even with this background, I've sometimes felt out of place, much like many of my friends – it's easy to feel like an outsider. This often isn't intentional; it's more about the setup, the routines, and the everyday language. Subtle adjustments in practice and communication could go a long way in making us feel like we belong.

THE ISSUE

The benefits of engaging *all* parents are well established. Children with actively involved fathers often show stronger language development, better emotional regulation, and improved social outcomes. Our involvement supports attachment and resilience and can provide another secure base for the child beyond their primary caregiver. But without encouragement or visibility, we might assume we're not needed, or worse, not welcome. That hesitation can lead to absence, even when the willingness is there.

There are a few reasons dads might hold back:

- **It can be overwhelming.** If the environment feels unfamiliar, we may retreat rather than push forward.
- **Work schedules.** Many fathers, like many mothers, work long hours or have jobs with limited flexibility. This can make being present at key moments a challenge.
- **Confidence.** Some of us didn't attend baby groups and may feel we lack the same knowledge or confidence in engaging with young children.
- **Social expectations.** Persistent stereotypes can frame early education as primarily the mother's domain, even though this isn't the case and many of us want equal involvement.

THE SOLUTION

Here are six practical strategies that help dads feel included:

1 Make inclusion visible

Use language like "parents" or "families" in emails, signs and forms. Display posters or photos that show dads playing and reading with children. Include dad-themed storybooks or highlight fathers in displays. It signals that we're part of the picture.

2 Offer flexible events

Midweek coffee mornings might not work for everyone. A quick online poll could reveal better times for busy or shift-working dads – like late afternoons, Saturdays, or digital events. Offering variety sends the message that everyone's time is valued.

3 Create dad-friendly activities

Give us something to do – hands-on tasks often feel more accessible. A Build with Dad morning, garden day, or outdoor adventure can be easier to step into than an open-ended social event.

Consider incorporating our interests or skills: woodwork, sports, or storytelling.

4 Encourage story time

Some dads love reading aloud but just need a nudge. Invite us to come in and read a story near pickup time. If time's tight, think outside the box – we might record a video of us reading at home to be shared during the day. It helps our children feel proud and helps us feel involved.

5 Build personal connections

Even if we don't linger at drop-off, a quick "How's your day looking?" or "They were telling us about your camping trip!" helps build rapport. Small conversations pave the way to greater involvement.

6 Use digital tools

Photos, updates, and short videos via apps help us stay connected even when we can't be there in person. Dads who travel or work long hours might feel more included.

THE IMPACT

When dads feel included, children benefit, often becoming more confident, secure, and socially capable. And the benefits extend to dads, too. Feeling involved supports our wellbeing and deepens our bond with our children. It also strengthens family connections and helps us build trust in the setting.

For some of us, early years engagement may be the first time we've been asked to participate in this way. A good experience here could lead to more active involvement throughout our child's learning journey.

With just a few tweaks, you might help fathers feel like they belong in unfamiliar spaces – and when we're included, we usually stay. Sometimes all it takes is an invite, a smile, or a moment of encouragement.





SAL MCKEOWN IS A FREELANCE EDITOR AND JOURNALIST

Is dyspraxia hiding in plain sight?

*It's a condition whose symptoms can be challenging to spot, but early years settings have an important role to play, as **Sal McKeown** explains...*

Dyspraxia has fallen off the radar in early years. My book *How to Help Your Dyslexic and Dyspraxic Child* was published in 2012. Dyspraxia was a common condition then and nurseries were alert to children who were not making expected progress with sitting, walking and co-ordination. Now it is rarely mentioned. In fact, I contacted over 20 nurseries to see if they had recent experience of a child with dyspraxia and not one of them did. Yet we know that children are arriving in Reception without many of the important physical skills that are part of being "school ready".

It doesn't help that dyspraxia is also known as DCD (developmental coordination disorder), and this

can confuse many people. DCD is a medical term for the condition. Dyspraxia is what we see: "an observable difficulty in motor performance: both motor coordination and planning how to do that task". The NHS website points out that "Dyspraxia can be used to describe movement difficulties that happen later in life because of damage to the brain, such as from a stroke or head injury."

Comments on forums show that parents often spot the signs before practitioners: "He drops things, crashes into people and objects, stands on things. He lurches when he walks or runs." "He can't ride a tricycle and is not interested in trying to work it out," and "I've really noticed the difference with his little sister, who is already confidently climbing the stairs."

WHY DON'T WE ASSESS EARLIER?

Occupational therapist Beth Smithson, who currently works for Sensory Integration Education, reflects on how referral patterns have shifted over the past two decades. Twenty years ago, physical disabilities were a major cause of referrals, with many presenting with signs of cerebral palsy or developmental coordination disorder. Autism was rarely mentioned. Today, children with DCD are often identified later, which Beth suggests may be influenced by how different needs present in the classroom. "Children with DCD are not going to disrupt a session but might sit quietly in the background, overwhelmed and unable to engage with an activity. Their needs can be easily missed, not because they are less important, but because they're less visible."

Estimates vary, but autism is diagnosed in around 1% of the population. Dyspraxia affects up to 6%, with up to 2% severely affected. Males are four times more likely to be dyspraxic than females. It has also been shown to run in families and frequently coexists with dyslexia. While we rarely diagnose dyspraxia and DCD until a child is six, this is not the case in other countries. Research in Portugal, published in 2022, followed six children (five boys, one girl). Signs of dyspraxia were identified at three or four years old. Early signs included a delay in developing a pincer grip. Five of the six went on to be diagnosed with ADHD, and five of the children experienced difficulties in school.

Parents often spot the signs before practitioners



DIAGNOSTIC DIFFICULTIES

DCD may present early. If a child cannot control their head by six months, there may well be a delay in all the motor skills: rolling, crawling, sitting and standing. But it is not clear-cut, as Beth explains: "The problem is, do they lack something in their sensory motor system or is it the lack of opportunity and the lack of engagement? Are parents doing too much for the child, feeding, fetching?" This is one reason why it normally takes at least a whole year of formal education before parents get a diagnosis.

The typical signs of DCD may not be obvious in early years. A child with dyspraxia can hit some of the early years milestones because they can learn repetitive motor tasks, such as kicking or catching a ball, running or going to the toilet, but struggle to learn new patterns of motor skills, such as using cutlery, scissors or a paintbrush.

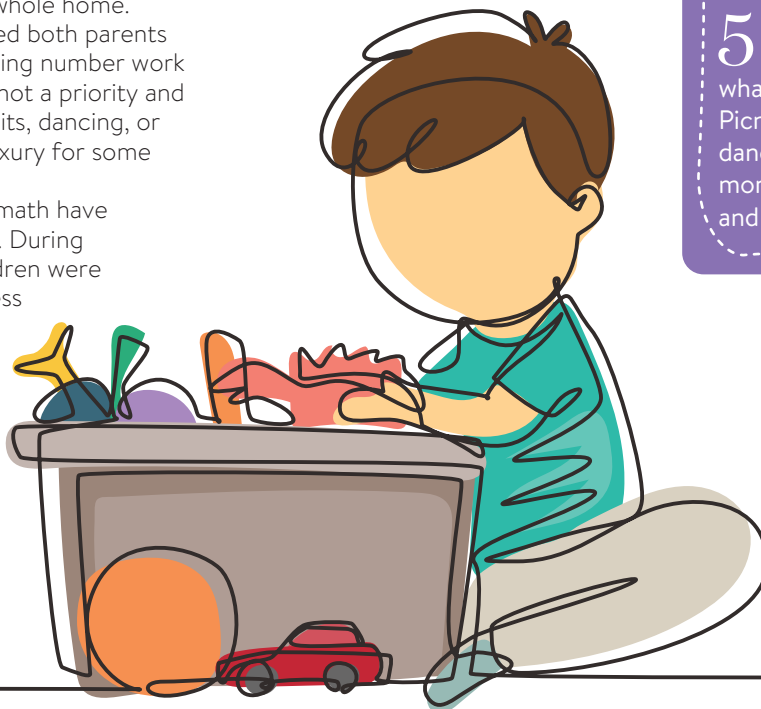
There may be other explanations for dyspraxia, such as environmental factors. Fuzz Dix is a Kids Matter Facilitator at St Luke's in Tower Hamlets, where 57% of children are living in households in poverty. She said: "It's not uncommon to have maybe seven or nine people living in a one- or two-bedroom flat in our community. And so home is not a place where play can happen easily." Those with more space may not be able to heat more than one room, so children are not exploring the whole home. Now more families need both parents to work and an increasing number work unsocial hours. Play is not a priority and activities such as ball pits, dancing, or music sessions are a luxury for some families.

Covid and its aftermath have affected development. During lockdown periods children were indoors with little access to outside play for months and became more sedentary. Paediatricians now see children whose

nervous systems and motor skills are less developed than in previous years. Screen time has impacted them too. Whereas parents would often give a toy to a baby in a pushchair so they had something to play with, these days they are as likely to put a phone in their hands. This is affecting children's motor skills, as well as their attention and concentration. Beth warns: "When you've got a three- or four-year-old with signs of what may be autism or ADHD, motor skills are not the parents' priority. But we need to be aware of the connection. If we work on their motor skills, their regulation may get better and their behaviour might improve."

Beth's final advice is this: "I want early years staff to look at barriers to children's participation and learning engagement through a motor lens. If a child keeps refusing to come and play in the home corner, let's check that they have the motor skills to engage. Our motor skills are the way that we interact with the world around us. They are the basis for curiosity and our desire to learn."

Find out more at movementmattersuk.org. Manchester Metropolitan University has been researching dyspraxia – read more at tinyurl.com/TEYmmdys and access videos for teaching skills to older children and adults at watchmedoit.mmu.ac.uk



FIVE WAYS TO RESPOND TO SIGNS OF DCD

1 If you spot an issue with motor skills, always mention it to parents. It is unprofessional not to share concerns with them, but always stress that the child may grow out of this phase.

2 Tactile toys and materials can stimulate sensors in the muscles and joints. Get out the putty, sand and playdough and encourage pulling, pushing, pinching, squishing, squeezing and kneading.

3 Make motor tasks achievable. Sit or stand next to the child, not in front of them, so they can copy your actions. Show and explain to them what you are doing so they can plan the task and rehearse the sequence in their head.

4 Scaffold physical tasks. Velcro gives the child a taste of independence, but then move on, step by step, to buttons and zips.

5 "Enjoyable movement" is key. Talk to families about what they could do together. Picnics, treasure hunts and dancing in the kitchen may be more appealing than climbing and swimming.



Set up a story factory

Phil Armstrong explains how you can unlock the educational power of blocks and small world play...

Visit any early years classroom and you are guaranteed to find blocks, large or small, and small world resources. When combined, these can create an inspiring “story factory” that supports children’s learning and development across the curriculum as part of any setting’s continuous provision.

Through the development of continuous provision, we provide a well-structured permanent framework for children’s play and provide a rich context for their experiences. Planned well for the age and stage of your children, and with effective adult interaction, this provision ensures that learning can be both enjoyable and appropriately challenging. However, as with any resource, there are questions we must ask about blocks and small world provision, including:

- Why do we provide blocks and small world resources in early years?
- How do they connect with the curriculum?
- How do we support learning to unlock their potential?

We all know that young children have a natural desire to construct and create. We see them use the blocks and small world resources to build new worlds and amazing structures, collaborate on complex designs, and bring their ideas and stories to life. But where does this start, and how does it develop?

STAGES OF BLOCK PLAY

Let’s consider for a moment, reflecting on Harriet Johnson’s *The Art of Block Building*, the types or stages of play we might see as children engage with these versatile resources:

- **Stage 1:** Blocks are carried around, not used for construction
- **Stage 2:** Building begins, mostly rows, either horizontal or vertical, with stacking
- **Stage 3:** Bridging, using two blocks with a space between them, connected by a third block
- **Stage 4:** Enclosures, with blocks placed to enclose a space
- **Stage 5:** Designs, patterns and elaborate structures emerge
- **Stage 6:** Large-scale co-operation – children plan with a purpose and use what they’ve built

Of course, we know that as part of their unique learning journey children will explore, experiment and investigate resources in a myriad of ways and at different times, but these stages give us a clear framework for development.

We can see from these just how easily children of different ages can utilise block play to build their confidence and expertise as they spend more time accessing these open-ended resources.

LEARNING LINKS

Blocks and small world provision offer a wealth of learning opportunities, especially when provided consistently year on year in a variety of contexts. Here are just a few examples of how block play supports different aspects of learning:

- **Physical skills:** fine and gross motor skills, hand-eye coordination, spatial awareness
- **Social & emotional skills:** autonomy, initiative, co-operation
- **Language & literacy skills:** vocabulary, beginnings of story recall



- **Mathematical skills:** size, shape, 1–1 correspondence, comparison
- **Creative skills:** divergent thinking, imagination
- **Scientific skills:** similarities and differences, balance, cause and effect

Rich learning opportunities that small world resources offer include:

- Creating stories around a set of characters
- Developing stories with familiar patterns and sequences
- Retelling stories to, and sharing story ideas with, an audience
- Designing a setting for a story and characters
- Drawing and labelling designs
- Creating maps of story settings
- Exploring ways to record ideas and stories

And many more!

Young children have a natural desire to construct and create

ENHANCING YOUR PROVISION

Enhanced provision extends learning by enabling children to further develop their ideas and interests as well as offering new and unfamiliar knowledge, skills and understanding, and enriching vocabulary. When we enhance provision, new resources, books, equipment, or artefacts are made available for a period of time, often for a few weeks, in response to what practitioners have observed children need next or to reflect themes, such as seasonal events. These new additions do not replace continuous provision but add a new dimension alongside it. In this way, enhancements offer either an extension to existing learning or provide a starting point for new learning, acting as a catalyst for exploring, talking and thinking about new ideas.

Enhancing your blocks and small world area might involve providing:

- Focused texts, such as a story currently being shared with your children

- Small world people and/or animals linked to texts
- Props linked to specific landscapes
- Resources linked to children's current interests or events, e.g. superheroes, space, football or minibests

Sometimes, rather than adding these directly into your continuous provision resources, you may prefer to develop an "enhancement area" (e.g. using a low-level play table), which gives a specific focus to the resources.

Enhancements and provocations are not permanent additions. To judge how long to offer them for, remember that enhancements need adult support, so make sure that you and your team have sufficient time to:

- Introduce the new ideas, resources and experiences
- Support and guide children's initial explorations
- Facilitate group discussion and provide feedback
- Observe and interact with children as they further explore and deepen their learning

It's also important to judge how many enhancements to have at any one time.

PARTNERS IN LEARNING

The key to unlocking the potential of any resource we offer is our understanding of child development and how children's innate desire to experiment supports learning over time, combined with our knowledge of the curriculum. Both strands guide how we interact with children as they experiment and create.

As we play alongside children in the blocks and small world area, we should:

- Observe and take note of their key interests and fascinations
- Respond to their requests and ideas
- Sensitive suggest possibilities to extend their play and thinking
- Model language and extend vocabulary
- Support with the development of imaginative play

As we act as role models, we are able to:

- Model how to think aloud by making comments such as "I've not thought about that before", "You've really made

me think about...", "How might I...?"

As we sensitively raise questions, our purpose is to:

- Stimulate ideas and add challenge with questions such as "What do you notice about...?", "I wonder how...?"

And when we are able to mobilise ourselves to teach effectively in these ways, we can unlock the power of our provision.

NEXT STEPS

At Early Excellence we have several free tools to help you support young children's learning, so please do take a look at our EYFS block area planning guide (tinyurl.com/TEYEEXbp). We also provide a carefully curated range of blocks and small world resources (tinyurl.com/TEYEEblsw) plus enhancements (tinyurl.com/TEYEEEn) selected by our curriculum team to maximise learning outcomes.

Find out more at earlyexcellence.com

REFLECT ON YOUR PRACTICE

- Audit your current blocks and small world resources to ensure they are of high quality.
- Reflect on the progression the resources offer, e.g. from two-year-old provision to Reception.
- Explore how your resources are supporting your curriculum and how they are used for adult-initiated activities and child-initiated learning.
- Check your whole team has a deep understanding of the potential of these resources.
- Consider carefully how you enhance these resources over the year to reflect children's interests and other themes you may be exploring with the children.



TRACY JACKSON IS ASSISTANT DIRECTOR EARLY YEARS AT THE NATIONAL LITERACY TRUST

Help them bond with books

You can play a powerful role in shaping young children's love of reading, says Tracy Jackson OBE...

Every year, the headlines are the same. Media reports on National Literacy Trust research highlight a worrying decline in the number of children who read for pleasure, with the sharpest focus often on late primary- and secondary-aged children. The concern is real and rightly so: reading for pleasure is one of the strongest indicators of future academic success and wellbeing.

But what often goes unreported, or at least underexplored, is the role of the early years in shaping that trajectory. By early primary school, many children have already formed strong attitudes towards reading, and those early beliefs can shape their future engagement. If we want to raise a generation of lifelong readers, we must stop waiting until children can read before helping them fall in love with reading.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

Reading for pleasure starts with joyful, shared experiences of stories, language and imagination, long before a child can decode a word on the page. Early language skills are the foundations for later reading success: research shows that children struggling with spoken language at age five are far more likely to fall behind in reading by age 11. That's why the National Literacy Trust's work focuses on high-quality interactions in the early years: chatting, playing, storytelling, and reading aloud. It's not about teaching children to read earlier; it's about helping them experience books as something warm, fun and meaningful.

*Children who
enjoy reading are
more likely to do it
frequently*

A love of reading isn't something that lives in the book corner or only appears at story time. In the most inspiring settings, books and stories are woven through the fabric of the day, sparking conversations, soothing transitions and enriching play. Whether it's a story that shapes role-play, a picture book explored under a tree, or a rhyme shared while tidying up, practitioners use stories to build connection and curiosity.

What makes a crucial difference is how adults bring stories to life. When children see books being chosen, handled, and loved by the people

around them, they learn that stories matter.

When they see or hear stories in their own languages or books that reflect their families, communities and interests, they learn that stories can belong to them.

AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Too often, conversations about early reading fall into a binary trap: phonics versus story, teaching versus playing, etc. But these are false divides. Children need both structure and joy, both the tools to read and the motivation to want to. Our research into reading for pleasure consistently highlights that children who enjoy reading are more likely to do it frequently, and frequent reading is linked to stronger language, wellbeing, and educational outcomes.

That's why the early years matter so much. This is when reading is still magic, when it means special time with someone who cares, a moment of calm, a ticket to a wild adventure. It's that emotional bond with books that practitioners and families are uniquely placed to nurture – not by forcing it, but by consistently and warmly inviting children into it.

YOU HOLD THE KEY

Every adult in an early years setting plays a powerful role in shaping a child's relationship with reading. This isn't about doing more; it's about doing things with intention. Story experiences don't need to be perfect or elaborate; they need to be warm, consistent, and connected to children's lives and cultures. And while not all families feel confident reading with their child, early years practitioners are brilliantly placed to nurture parents' confidence and show them that the most powerful thing they can do is to weave stories into daily routines.

Let's continue creating space for stories that make us laugh, wonder and feel seen. Let's give every child the chance to see themselves as a reader, even before they can read a word. Because reading for pleasure doesn't start with decoding, it starts with joy and connection.

Visit literacytrust.org.uk





RICHARD WAITE IS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONAL

Getting to grips with AI

*The technology involved might be complex, but artificial intelligence can make your role simpler, as **Richard Waite** explains...*



Artificial intelligence, or AI, seems to always be in the news, but if you're still not sure what the fuss is about, you're not alone. Earlier this year, Tapestry, the childhood education platform, surveyed early years educators and found that two-thirds had not used AI in their role, with many reporting they didn't know anything about it.

"AI" refers to technology that can perform tasks usually requiring human intelligence like recognising speech, generating ideas or spotting patterns. It imitates the way humans make decisions, solve problems and learn. There are lots of benefits to using it, and respondents to the Tapestry survey who had used AI reported it helped them save time, especially with admin tasks.

DECIPHERING THE TECH SPEAK

- **Generative AI:** AI that can create content such as text, images and video, based on prompts that you provide.
- **Prompt:** the question or instruction you give to an AI tool to explain what you need, for example, "I need an image of a child aged 3-4 from a Caribbean ethnic background."
- **Large language model (LLM):** a type of AI that is "trained", using lots of text, to understand and respond in natural language. Examples are tools like Chat GPT or Copilot.

Visit the Alan Turing Institute's AI glossary (tinyurl.com/TEYdsai) for more non-technical definitions.

FOUR WAYS YOU CAN USE AI

Personalised learning

AI-powered platforms can suggest activities tailored to individual interests and developmental stages, helping

educators to differentiate support. At the same time, your professional judgement is an essential part of the process. For instance, AI can help you to quickly identify learning gaps, but your knowledge of a particular child will be essential for providing the right next learning experience.

SEND & EAL support

Language and accessibility tools, such as text-to-speech and translation apps, can help children with additional support needs or those with English as an additional language.

Reducing workload

AI can be useful in drafting written information, anything from a poster to advertise the summer fete to information for a press release. It can help you to find information or research topics, and many AI tools explain information sources as well. Lots of admin tasks can be automated: some AI platforms can read and reply to emails or check and add dates to your calendar.

Ideas & inspiration

AI tools can be useful for coming up with ideas that you can then feed into your own planning. For example, you can ask AI to write your weekly newsletter just by telling it the theme you want to discuss. They can also help you to stay up to date, suggesting articles or training that you may wish to use for your own professional development.

AI WITH HI

Although AI can provide useful support, human intelligence (HI) is essential for understanding children's unique needs. Educators notice subtle cues and can adapt to individuals' backgrounds and emotional states.

If you're ready to explore AI, then start small and keep HI in the driving seat. Technology can empower us, but it can't replace the skilled professionals at the heart of early years education.

Richard has worked in the sector for over 30 years and has expertise in early years technology. Read more about the findings of the Tapestry survey at tinyurl.com/TEYtpsrv

TOOLS TO TRY

There are many AI tools that are relevant to early years settings. Here are a few that educators tell me they're using...

- 1 Notebook LM and Gamma AI:** lesson planning, generating activity ideas, and creating resources
- 2 Artspace AI:** inspiring creative projects and digital art exploration
- 3 Sintra AI:** streamlining communication and documentation
- 4 Designrr:** creating e-books and guides for both staff and families
- 5 Otter.ai and Wispr Flow:** speech-to-text apps for rapid notetaking and assessment records
- 6 Google Translate, DeepL and iTranslate:** translation and accessibility tools for reducing language barriers and making content accessible to all learners



JANE NEWBERRY IS A POET, CHILDREN'S AUTHOR AND SONGWRITER

“Poems nourish imaginations”

Jane Newberry explains why playful poetry is so engaging for the very young...



Children at a primary school come in for a poetry workshop. Faces are curious, fearful, uncertain, defensive, expectant, too-cool-for-skool, watchful and wary. What is this thing, poetry? Will it be hard? Will it make me look silly? Will it be scary/weird? Will it...? Is it safe? I – that’s me in the big red boots – feel drawn to all that is inclusive, all that is easy and fun. I dive straight in, no intros, and I watch the fears and apprehension fall away.

A very large portion of my life has been dedicated to producing poetry that anyone can do, however uncertain they are, whatever their special need. I

aim to break down barriers of mistrust in learning.

Part of my USP as a children’s poet is where I began: with writing songs – simple join-in, jam-along songs, which I published under the banner “playsongs”. (*A Sackful of Songs*, Cramer Music 2005). And it is the *playing* that is needed in early years. Children need to be free to play and to be educated through playful concepts.

By joining in with a song taught aurally, children access their own rhythmic skills, those built into everyone’s DNA. Mankind

By joining in with a song taught aurally, children access their own rhythmic skills

almost certainly sang for ritual, for reassurance, for pleasure long before words were written down. In today’s primary settings, some teachers are uncertain about leading singing activities, but singing and performing poetry “out loud” is important for children’s general wellbeing as well

as specific developments within the curriculum.

THE POWER OF PLAY-RHYMES

Play-rhymes fit very well within a programme of playsongs and percussion games. Variety keeps up concentration levels, which may fluctuate in EYFS, and I always keep each separate song, poem or exercise very short and playful. Back when I was teaching traditional nursery rhymes and songs for two or three years, I was painfully aware that many rhymes were becoming archaic – not many Little Boy Blues were blowing up their horns (thank goodness!), and there were not many forlorn shepherdesses in suburban Kingston-upon-Thames. Children like singing about things they understand and know, like food, dinosaurs, monsters, teddies, etc.

My first attempts at rhyme were trialled by real children in parent/toddler groups. This became important to me, and over the years I have dropped songs and rhymes if parents or children didn't rave about them or found them hard. Things have to work. Here's a rhyme written in 2004, for which I produced illustrations showing the actions:

*This little chick climbed the hill so steep
when he got to the top, he said,
"Cheep, cheep, cheep!"*

*This little lamb said, "It's very far ..."
When she got to the top, she said,
"Baa, baa, baa!"*

*This little duck said, "I'm going back"
When he got half way ... he said,
"Quack, quack, quack!"*

It was an easy transition from songs to play-rhymes. Steady rhythms that can be beaten with claves or clapped or tapped on knees were the foundation, as what sounds a bit boring to adults is perfect for children.

I love to write rhymes with surprises, like animals popping up or out, as these build a bit of "theatre" into a short poem. It is a joy to receive videos from schools that show the imaginative ways children act out a short play-rhyme.

While I enjoy the challenge of writing for adults, writing for the very young is still, after so many years, fun and exciting. Children constantly

RHYME TIME!

Here are CLPE's top tips for sharing verse with young children...

- **Expose all children to poetry** – ensure poetry collections and anthologies are available for all children and families to enjoy regularly both at home and school.
- **Read poetry for pleasure** – simply share poetry, rhyme and song every single day.
- **Introduce children to poets who reflect their realities** – let children see and hear poets perform in a variety of voices and dialects.
- **Create a poetry classroom** – encourage children to revisit, share and learn their favourite rhymes and poems, building up a class collection.
- **Immerse children in poetry** – use poetry, rhyme and song to support children's interests and all areas of learning and provision.
- **Lift the words off the page** – read aloud different kinds of poetry across a range of themes,

tuning children into the way they can use sound and create meaning.

- **Make poetry a social reading experience** – engage children in poetry in active and engaging ways through conversation, wordplay, shared reading and performance.
- **Invite open responses to poetry** – value personal and creative responses to poetry through talk, response to illustration, artwork, visualisation, music and role play.
- **Develop fluency through poetry** – tune children into the distinctive rhythm of a poem, drawing attention to rhyming patterns and interesting meanings.
- **Make poetry relatable** – read and write poems that express an emotion, capture an experience or evoke a memory.

CLPE, the national centre for children's poetry, offers practical support for teachers, including book recommendations, teaching sequences and CPD. Visit clpe.org.uk

bring me ideas as their minds expand on an idea I have planted earlier. My best song came about after gathering claves into a box: two boys were being rather slow, and one had the claves on his head while the other copied him. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Well, I'm a rabbit, and Luca is being a reindeer," came the reply. The same inspiration has given me a great play-rhyme about aliens. Thanks Luis and Luca!

WONDER, MISCHIEF AND FUN

A great deal of emphasis is placed on the term "child-centred" in EYFS pedagogy. It is, of course, key to attracting children to learning. So often, what is offered to children are smaller or watered-down versions of what works for grown-ups, and children are *not* mini adults; they are children, full of wonder, mischief and fun. Yes, they wear their emotions on the outside, but having fewer inhibitions makes them much more

responsive to the full range of the arts – this is a gift to the children's poet. You can guarantee your lions will truly roar, your dragons will flap their wings, and your snakes will hiss – and who knows what the dinosaurs will do!

Poems nourish children's imaginations, and as development goals force them down specific pathways, I feel children's writers must lure them off the beaten track to the wild places, the hidden valleys, the rocky deserts and out across the high seas.



Jane is a favourite on the CLiPPA, CLPE Children's Poetry Award. She was shortlisted in 2021 with her book *Big Green Crocodile* and was on this year's shortlist too with *Big Red Dragon* (Otter-Barry Books). Visit otterbarrybooks.com



FELICITY GILLESPIE IS THE DIRECTOR OF KINDRED², A LEADING EARLY YEARS CHARITY

“Education must begin at home”

*With increasing numbers of children starting school lacking basic skills, it's vital parents understand the importance of the early years, says **Felicity Gillespie**...*

Every parent wants the best for their children and to see them thrive. Which begs the question: why are a shockingly high number of pupils entering primary school ill-equipped for the learning journey ahead?

Teachers report that a third of children are starting Reception class unable to dress or feed themselves independently (tinyurl.com/TEYkSQ2sr). This lack of basic self-care skills means that every child in the classroom is losing out on an average of 2.4 hours a day of teaching time while schools struggle to play catch-up. One in four children is not yet toilet-trained at age four, a stark contrast to the 1970s and 80s, when 83% of 18-month-olds were out of nappies.

The school-readiness crisis is arguably the most important equality issue in society. The science is unequivocal: the earliest months and years of life are immensely consequential to our later life chances. The fastest rate of brain growth and the greatest impact on life chances happen before children turn two. Our brains double in size in the first year alone. Research has even shown that a child's development score at 22 months can accurately predict educational outcomes at 26 years. Much of the attainment gap we see at age 16 can be traced to the time children start school. Poor vocabulary skills at age five, for instance, make adults four times more likely to have reading difficulties, three times more likely to have mental health problems, and twice as likely to be unemployed.

Yet for every £1 invested in the early years, the Exchequer saves £13 in later-life state interventions. Conversely, our collective failure to intervene early costs us dearly – over £16 billion every year.

ESTABLISHING EXPECTATIONS

There is apparent confusion and ignorance about what a child starting Reception should be able to handle, and what parents should be doing to support their child's early development.



Our research indicates that less than half (48%) of parents believe it's completely their responsibility to ensure their children are toilet-trained. Others are needlessly anxious if their child isn't able to write the name or know all their letters when they start Reception – neither expectation is correct. The science clearly indicates that for good bowel and bladder health, children should be out of nappies between 18 and 30 months. I didn't know that – did you?

The best nurseries cannot alone support children's development

Further complicating matters is a significant misalignment in how school readiness is defined and measured at a policy level. While parents and school governors generally understand "school ready" to mean the skills a child needs when they start Reception year, the new government target for 75% being school ready – part of the Best Start in Life strategy and the new Opportunity Mission – is assessed at the end of Reception. These mixed-up measures of two different developmental points overlook the immense challenge faced by staff, who find themselves on the front lines of a crisis.

It is time to accept a fundamental truth: parents are the first and most important educators of children. The best nurseries cannot alone support children's development without the engagement of informed parents, aided by knowledgeable and accessible services where needed. Yet, many new mums and dads are struggling, increasingly isolated from crucial sources of advice. We've seen a 40% reduction in health visitors since 2015 and the closure of integrated services provision through Sure Start centres. While some blame the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and the shadow of the pandemic, frustration among teachers is growing, with more telling us that the phrase "they are a Covid baby" has become an excuse.

TAKING ACTION

The good news is that the early years sector has begun to address the lack of clarity of expectations with a collaborative effort. A group of leading experts, education and care providers, and parenting groups have come together for the first time to produce a simple, single definition for parents, nursery settings, childminders and schools. Startingreception.co.uk is a great starting point for a conversation, with links to a wealth of practical advice for parents and carers who might be struggling.

We need to find a way to openly discuss the importance of parenting without sounding like an interfering "nanny" state. Nobody is suggesting that if a child is struggling, parents should beat themselves up or think they will be behind forever. Children can catch up; it just takes longer and

costs more. This isn't about blaming or shaming; it's about empowering parents and giving children the strongest possible start.

There's ample opportunity available for parents to support their children's development. Simple, everyday actions like putting down the phone to pick up a book and reading together, playing a game, or having a simple two-way "serve and return" conversation (think Wimbledon!). And yes, getting those nappies off.

By working together, we can lay a strong foundation for every child's future success, unlocking their potential and saving billions for the taxpayer. It's time to move from ambition to action.

Find out more about Kindred's work at kindredsquared.org.uk

HELP FOR HOME




Share these ideas for parents to try with their children...

- Parents who have concerns about their child's talking or understanding can use this checker with lots of resources for things to practise: **progress-checker.speechandlanguage.org.uk**. There's also plenty of advice at **Startingreception.co.uk** and on the Dingley's Promise website: **dingley.org.uk**
- Toilet training! There are great tips to help get those nappies off available from the experts at ERIC – visit **eric.org.uk/potty-training**
- Encourage children to practise independence skills like putting on their shoes – the NHS has clear suggestions to make it easier: **tinyurl.com/TEYnhsDS**
- The World Health Organisation provides clear guidance on healthy screen-time habits. Visit **tinyurl.com/TEYwhoST**
- Parents can access tips on having simple conversations with their child at **tinyurl.com/TEYnhsCNV**
- There's plenty of advice on implementing healthy routines and ensuring children get enough sleep at **tinyurl.com/TEYbbcBDT**
- The singing dentist can help parents with toothbrushing! Visit **tinyurl.com/TEYbbcTBR**
- If a child struggles to climb stairs one foot at a time, using the wall for support, parents can try these ideas for promoting healthy movement: **tinyurl.com/TEYystHM**
- Share the strategies your setting uses to develop fine motor skills: **tinyurl.com/TEYgovFMS**
- Promote the importance of playing with others. Here are some great ideas for parents to try: **tinyurl.com/TEYbbclG**



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BETH DOWNIE IS A REGISTERED NUTRITIONIST

Plan a day of festive food

*Cultural celebrations and seasonal changes are fantastic opportunities to promote healthy eating while building a range of skills, says **Beth Downie**...*

In early years settings, food is far more than fuel – it's a powerful tool for learning, connection and exploration. One particularly effective way to promote healthy eating habits while supporting wider developmental goals is through days centred around food and nutrition. Whether inspired by cultural festivals, seasonal changes or classroom topics, these themed events create meaningful opportunities to introduce young children to new foods, engage their senses, and celebrate diversity and offer a range of links to the EYFS:

Prime areas

- Communication and language: *describing textures, tastes, and ingredients*
- Physical development: *food prep builds fine motor skills and self-care independence*
- Personal, social and emotional development: *turn-taking, making choices, respecting others' food cultures*

Specific area

- Understanding the world: *learning about traditions, beliefs, and where food comes from*

DAYS TO REMEMBER

Themed days offer a playful, low-pressure way to introduce children to a variety of healthy foods they might not otherwise try. Presenting new fruits, vegetables, grains, and proteins as part of a special event – linked to a

story, tradition, or cultural celebration – helps remove the fear or hesitation often associated with unfamiliar foods. When children are invited to take part in simple food preparation tasks, such as washing vegetables or mixing ingredients, they gain a sense of ownership and curiosity that makes them more willing to taste what they've helped create. These days also offer natural opportunities to reinforce messages about balanced diets. For instance, exploring a traditional Mediterranean meal can open discussion around healthy fats like olive oil, the importance of fresh produce, and the role of lean proteins in an informal and relevant way.

MULTISENSORY LEARNING

Themed days with a food focus engage all the senses – taste, touch, smell, sight, and sometimes even sound – making them ideal for supporting multisensory learning.

Preparing and exploring food can help children develop skills across a range of learning areas, including maths (counting ingredients), science (witnessing changes in texture or temperature), language (describing taste and smell), and even cultural understanding. These sensory-rich experiences help information stick, especially for young learners. For example, celebrating Chinese New Year by making dumplings not only builds fine motor skills through folding and shaping but also introduces the concept of wholegrains or vegetables as part of a balanced meal. Such hands-on learning creates stronger, more lasting connections.

INCLUSION & RESPECT

Food provides a natural and inclusive way to explore the diverse backgrounds of children and families. Celebrating themed days that are linked to religious festivals, national holidays, or family traditions through this medium can encourage empathy, curiosity and a broader worldview. Children begin to understand and appreciate how people around the world eat, celebrate and come together.

A Diwali-themed day, for example, might involve making fruit chaat – a healthy and colourful dish – while exploring the vibrant spices common in Indian cooking. As children talk about and experience these foods, they also begin to understand the role food plays in



festivals of light, building respect and cultural awareness in a joyful and age-appropriate way.

EMBRACING AUTUMN

The start of a new school year brings signs of seasonal change: golden leaves, crisp air and an abundance of autumn harvests. The variety of vibrant fruits and vegetables available provides the perfect opportunity to engage children in meaningful, hands-on nutrition education, while natural themes of change, growth, and abundance can be used to introduce healthy eating habits in fun and sensory-rich ways. Through activities like tasting seasonal produce, exploring the colours and textures of autumn foods, and learning where food comes from, early years settings can plant the seeds of lifelong, healthy choices.

A HEALTHY HALLOWEEN

While not all early years settings choose to celebrate Halloween, for those that do, it can be an engaging way to explore healthy foods. Here are some simple ideas that combine spooky fun with hands-on food learning.

Banana ghosts

Ingredients: Bananas, raisins or dark chocolate chips, yoghurt (optional for coating)

Activity:

- Children peel and cut bananas in half. They press raisins or chips into the banana to make eyes and a mouth.
- Optional: dip in yoghurt and freeze for “icy ghosts”.

Learning link: Counting, recognising body parts, fine motor skills (pinching and pressing)

Spooky spider crackers

Ingredients: Wholegrain crackers, soft cheese or hummus, pretzel sticks, raisins

Activity:

- Children spread cheese or hummus on the crackers.
- They insert pretzel “legs” and use raisins for eyes.

Learning link: Shapes, symmetry and following step-by-step instructions

Witches’ brew smoothie

Ingredients: Spinach, banana, frozen berries, yoghurt/milk

Activity:

- Children help measure and add ingredients to a blender.
- Talk about colours changing (“magic brew”) and taste test.

Learning link: Science (liquid/solid), turn-taking, sensory vocabulary

Edible wands

Ingredients: Breadsticks, cream cheese or nut-free spread, seeds or veggie sprinkles

Activity:

- Children dip one end of the breadstick in the spread, then roll it in seeds or chopped veg.
- Optionally decorate with a star (cheese or fruit cut-out).

Food provides a natural and inclusive way to explore diverse backgrounds

Learning link: Coordination, patternmaking, self-expression

OTHER IDEAS

Spooktacular science

Combine cooking with early STEM – e.g. melting, freezing, texture changes, and more. Try experiments like making ice cubes to explore freezing or melting chocolate to explore reversible physical changes (solid to liquid to solid again).

Pumpkin patch to plate

Explore pumpkins as a learning theme – e.g. sensory play, cooking, counting seeds. Invite children to use spoons, cups, or bare hands to scoop out the inside of a pumpkin. Let them explore textures (slimy pulp, slippery seeds) and ask questions like, “How does it feel? Smell? Sound?”

Use the dried seeds in sensory bins, sorting trays, or seed-counting games to practise matching the number of seeds to the number on a flashcard. Stack mini pumpkins to introduce size ordering and counting.

Let children paint pumpkin halves or create seed-decorated collages, supporting fine motor skills and creative expression. Extend learning with a cooking activity – like pumpkin

soup or roasted seeds – where children measure, stir, sequence and taste.

REMEMBER...

- Always do a safety/allergen check and use age-appropriate tools (e.g. table knives and safety scissors).
- Use food handling as a chance to model hygiene and independence (e.g. handwashing and using tongs).
- Offer visual instructions or step-by-step picture cards for children to follow.

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

CHOOSE YOUR THEME

Six food-focused celebrations to consider...

Harvest Festival

Celebrate seasonal vegetables by using them to make soup or homemade bread recipes (it’s even better if they’re homegrown!).

World Food Day

Explore globally available foods (grains, fruits, and protein) by creating a “tasting passport”.

Diwali

Introduce children to whole foods and the uses of spices by making a fruit salad with cinnamon and cardamom.

Ramadan/Eid

Try dates and explore hydration and balance by making smoothies or fruity yoghurt bowls.

Christmas

Make use of citrus fruits, warming spices, and other more indulgent/specialised ingredients by preparing orange and cranberry oat bites.

Halloween

Explore healthier options and creative prep as you make pumpkin or butternut squash soup and banana ghosts and taste pumpkin seeds.



LORNA WILLIAMS IS THE PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT MANAGER (LEARNING) AT BCLM

A trip to the past

*Visiting living museums can help your children get hands-on with history and build their cultural capital, says **Lorna Williams**...*

Planning a visit beyond your early years setting can unlock learning opportunities that tap into all aspects of your children's development and align with the learning and development requirements of the EYFS. There are many places you could go, but have you ever considered taking your group to a living museum? Whether shopping in the high street, joining story time at the library, or sampling working life as a postie, these experiences have a host of benefits, allowing children to learn in relatable but different settings while building their cultural capital.

Living museums allow children to step back in time and immerse themselves in a different era. Having real examples of "now" and "then", showing what's the same and what's different, enables adults to help young children build an

understanding of time and its passing. Costumes, props and authentic buildings bring the past to life, as does having an opportunity to talk to characters in period costume and get a glimpse of what life was like – there really are no silly questions for them to ask, but I'm sure your children's imaginations and unique trains of thought will challenge and amuse even the most experienced staff!

Not all children get the opportunity to visit museums

LEARNING LIFE SKILLS

Visits needn't only have a history focus, though. They also provide valuable opportunities for children to practise life skills, such as learning to cross the road safely or boarding a bus, in a controlled environment. Similarly, recreated homes, shops and workplaces provide a safe place to expose children to the roles of important members of society, such as police or healthcare workers, and encourage interactions with adults outside of children's usual network. This exposure to the world of work and positive role models might even lead to early careers inspiration.

Live interpretation direct from trained museum staff has the advantage of not relying on the written word or having fixed pacing or messaging that recorded interpretation might have. This increases accessibility for an early years audience. Communication can be a two-way exchange, a conversation, reacting to the group's understanding and interest.

Living museums build understanding of cultural, social, technological and ecological diversity, enriching children's perspectives, while exposure to fiction and non-fiction stories widens their vocabulary and communication skills.

Sadly, not all children get the opportunity to visit museums and other cultural organisations with their families. It's recognised that exposure to such settings builds cultural capital and, in turn, helps children feel that museums are a place for them. Living museums rich in people stories help children to recognise their place in society and make history relevant to their contemporary life. A visit might be a foundational step in a lifetime love of museums, opening up future engagement with cultural offers.

PLANNING A VISIT

When planning a visit, look for providers with programmes dedicated to an early years audience who pitch both the content and delivery mechanisms at the required level. Content will vary depending on the museum's collections, but suitable delivery might utilise role play, promote children's creativity, or give opportunities to get hands-on. Multisensory, active engagement will aid the formation of memories and help the experience stick.

Plus, don't forget to check out the venue's facilities to be reassured the practical needs of your group can be catered for. These might include toilets with toddler steps and nappy-change places, a covered, bookable space for lunch or a snack, flexibility on arrival and departure times to fit in with your usual schedules, and an opportunity for a pre-trip planning visit to complete risk assessments, see the site, and feel fully prepared for your day out.

Finally, don't forget to have fun! The joy of a living museum visit comes from its immersive nature – meeting people, hearing stories first-hand from costumed guides, seeing real buildings and objects, and walking around in history. Despite all the possibilities for learning and development, the biggest takeaway should be an enjoyable day out broadening your children's experience of the world they live in.

Learn more about the Black Country Living Museum in Dudley at bclm.com





Elevator PITCH

PARTNER CONTENT

Take two minutes to read all about the Black Country Living Museum's first dedicated early years offer.



1 A UNIQUE SETTING
Living history museums offer a unique opportunity to step back in time and feel fully immersed in the past. Introducing children to museums at a young age builds their cultural capital and a belief that museums are places for them, supporting deeper engagement when they visit again later in their childhood.

3 INVESTING IN STAFF
Three- to five-year-olds have wide-ranging needs, and individuals vary greatly in their development and what they've been exposed to in their Reception class, preschool or nursery. We've invested in specialist EYFS training for our colleagues to help them better understand their groups.

“Living history museums offer children a unique opportunity to feel fully immersed in the past”



2 KNOWLEDGEABLE GUIDES
A knowledgeable guide is assigned to each group for the duration of their visit. Each visit follows a focused theme, introducing the concepts of the past and present, and building on the familiar to explore new ideas. The museum offers a safe space to experience a high street, going into a post office, or ordering groceries.

4 GROWING OUR OFFER
Building on the success of our “People Who Help Us” themed experience, work is continuing to launch “Traditional Tales”, centred around the museum’s new building: Woodside Library. The 1963 building provides the perfect dedicated space for storytelling and story sharing, replicating the experience that generations before have enjoyed.

To find out more, visit bclm.com/learn or email learning@bclm.com





DR JAYNE SYMONS IS HEAD OF PRE-PREP AT EDGEBOROUGH SCHOOL

“Children’s behaviour is communication”

Dr Jayne Symons explains why her award-winning team chose to put emotional regulation at the forefront of their practice...

Within early childhood education, it remains all too common to find provision focused heavily on a child’s phonetic knowledge or acquiring topic-related facts. Achievement and success are invariably associated with what is produced. The pursuit of “education” over “development” fuels behaviour management systems driven by incentives and consequences that praise compliance, overlooking the true needs of the child.

At Edgeborough, an independent prep school in Surrey, we chose a different path. Our early years team has spent the past year embedding an approach centred on emotional regulation, and this focus now touches every aspect of our practice – from our language use, to the design of our environment, and even our policies. At its heart is a deep belief in the power of co-regulation and relationships to help children develop the capacity to self-regulate.

This change has been guided by neuroscience, shaped by professional development, and (crucially) built from within by a team who wanted to ensure

they were meeting the needs of the children in our care as fully as possible.

WHY REGULATION?

At Edgeborough, we have always given emphasis to the relationships that we build with our children and families, before all else. However, on reflection, this had not fully permeated into our wider provision, particularly the way that we were responding to emotionally charged behaviour. Dysregulation was often being met as challenging behaviour, with staff attention directed towards the expressed behaviour and subsequent actions aimed at stopping or fixing this (often with a misplaced reward or consequence). Looking back, our knowledge of the brain was not sufficient to shift our focus beyond the child’s actions in that moment to the wider context and what the vulnerable young child was trying to communicate to us through their behaviour.

Access to training and new ideas acted as the catalyst for change. Our key

staff received online training with the brilliant Dr Mine Conkbayir MBE, which ignited our interest and set us on a path of change. We then reviewed our behaviour policy and realised it was out of step with what we were beginning to understand about young children’s brains. When children are dysregulated (when they shout, push, hide or shut down), this must be met with support and empathy from us, as it is a stress response.

UNDERSTANDING THE BRAIN

Central to our work today is a grounding in neuroscience. We understand the child’s brain as a social organ, shaped by relationships. Drawing on the work of Dr Dan Siegel and furthered by Dr Mine Conkbayir MBE (bit.ly/45EF3Th), in simple terms, we view the brain through the metaphor of a house and as having:



- A “**downstairs brain**”, which is in charge of survival, constantly scans for threats and triggers stress responses such as fight, flight, freeze or fawn.
- An “**upstairs brain**”, which handles rational thinking, language, focus and decision-making – but only when the child feels safe and regulated.

When a child experiences stress – anything from a snatched toy to a loud noise – the connecting staircase between the upstairs and downstairs brain falls away (as in the child, it is not yet secure) and the two brains fail to work as one, with the downstairs, emotive brain dominating. Another way to understand this is described by the term “flipping the lid”, with the upper rational, thinking brain disconnecting or flipping up from the more developed lower brain, making reasoning impossible. Dr Dan Siegel’s hand model vividly illustrates this (tinyurl.com/TEYdsbr), showing that regulation can only happen once the brain feels safe again.

Children learn to regulate because they have adults who co-regulate with them

So, instead of asking, “How do we stop this behaviour?” we began to ask, “What does this child need right now to feel safe and understood?”

A CULTURE OF CO-REGULATION

Self-regulation doesn’t develop in isolation. Children learn to regulate because they have adults who co-regulate with them. We stay close,



calm and emotionally present during moments of distress.

Our provision is created with self-regulation in mind, with quiet areas, sensory stations, and calm aesthetics. Daily routines are predictable, transitions are softened, and children are involved in decisions. We also pay close attention to the five domains of stress described by Stuart Shanker – biological, cognitive, social, emotional and prosocial (bit.ly/4ovYLZ4) – and strive to reduce pressure across all five. Moreover, staff speak openly about their own mood: “I’m feeling a bit tired today, I think I’ll do some exercise, will you join me?” so that children hear and see what regulation looks like.

Underpinning this, our behaviour policy has become a regulation policy. It underscores our belief that children’s behaviour is communication, and we need to respond with empathy first, before guiding reflection once the child is calm. In making this step, we have built a robust culture of regulation, grown from within, through discussion, agreement and time.

When big emotions do surface we follow a set of steps that draw from the progressive thinking of Stuart Shanker, Dr Mine Conkbayir MBE and Kate Silverton (bit.ly/47I3bvn), which provides staff with a clear and compassionate process:

1. Name and validate the feeling and the evident emotion.
2. Offer reassurance to communicate that it’s okay to feel this emotion.
3. Reduce stressors through a hug, quiet space, or sensory support such as a weighted blanket.
4. Restore energy through exercise, time in nature and distraction.
5. Reflect together with the child (when they’re ready) about what happened, what could have happened, and what we’d look to do next time.

WHAT WE’VE SEEN

A year on, we can see significant changes. Our children speak with emotional awareness and empathy. They comment on one another’s feelings, offer support, and articulate what helps them feel better. We’ve heard children say things like, “I feel fizzy, it’s too loud in here,” or “X is frustrated – I can help, I’ll play trains with them.” These aren’t just sweet moments; they’re evidence of deep,

developing emotional literacy.

We know our journey is not complete. We’re proud that we’ve received recognition through securing the EYFS Setting of the Year award at the 2025 Tes Schools Awards, but we know there is much more we can do.

We continue to offer CPD, review policies, and run workshops for families. We want every adult in our community (not just those in the EYFS) to understand more about how children’s brains work, and how emotional wellbeing underpins learning and metacognition across the curriculum.

Find out more at tes.com/schools-awards

SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL REGULATION IN THE EARLY YEARS

- **Co-regulate before you educate** – children need to feel safe before they can learn.
- **Name the emotion** – help children recognise and label how they feel.
- **Create calm spaces** – use sensory tools, quiet corners and predictable routines.
- **Model emotional language** – talk aloud about your own feelings and how you manage them.
- **Reflect later, not in the moment** – wait until a child is calm before discussing what happened.
- **Support staff** – set aside time for professional development and professional reflection as a group and as individuals. Dr Mine Conkbayir’s *Keep Your Cool Toolbox* is a great resource: keepyourcooltoolbox.com
- **Self-reflect** – consider your own emotional standpoint; how are you looking after yourself to enable you to look after others?

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

“Stop, observe, and listen”

*With an Empathy Doll, practitioners can unlock and explore young children’s big emotions, explains **Kirstine Beeley**...*

I couldn’t have imagined nearly 20 years ago that an approach to working with very young children that I started back in 2006 would still be going strong today, and arguably be needed more now than ever before.

As a former early years teacher, it had always seemed to me that there was a gaping hole when it came to helping young children explore their emotions and also in practitioner understanding of how young brains work and how big emotions can lead to behaviour. At the same

time, the government in England was waking up to the same idea and released the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) project, which urged teachers of all ages to help support children with their emotions.

Persona Dolls had been used with children since the 1970s to support the exploration of anti-bias issues such as anti-racism and anti-bullying, so I knew that dolls were a powerful tool for interacting with children. However, the concepts covered by Persona Dolls seemed, to me, to be beyond the egocentric age and stage appropriateness of early years. I felt there was a need for something that helped very young children to explore everyday emotions impacting their everyday lives – and so the idea of the Empathy Dolls Approach © was born.

In 2006 the approach was first introduced to a room full of teachers in Leeds, England. They were asked to treat the doll as, effectively, another child in their settings, the idea being that children’s emotions and feelings could be explored via the doll. Practitioners, talking on behalf of the dolls, could explore big emotions that came from everyday routines and



situations, empowering them to support the children accordingly.

Very quickly we realised that the approach also helped staff to look at and think about how routines, the environment, and life events can have a huge effect on young children and that their own behaviours towards these situations could be adapted and improved to help to pre-empt and minimise emotional upheaval.

Exploring how the brain can experience an “emotional hijacking” in response to a change in situation, the unpredictable actions of another child, or even an inability to convey needs and wants because of developing language, the approach quickly showed practitioners how to look for and develop more emotionally supportive settings. Understanding that behaviour is a form of communication helped staff to rethink their responses to situations and develop simple co-regulation strategies to soothe and calm children in emotional states.

From those humble beginnings Leeds City Council quickly decided to invest in an Empathy Doll for every early years setting in the city, such was their impact in offering emotional support. Many other authorities

followed suit. Now, in 2025, the approach is used across the whole of the UK and Europe. Post pandemic, Empathy Dolls are taking on an even more vital role in helping children, families and practitioners. With reduced access to parent groups and limited social interactions in recent years, many settings are reporting increased issues with settling in and observing higher levels of both child and parental anxiety.

The approach continues to help children to explore and reason with everyday situations away from the stereotypical “mad, sad, glad and bad” emotion faces that adorn many an educational catalogue. It offers a chance for practitioners to stop, to observe, and to truly listen to children and how they are feeling. Just because children do not have the words yet does not mean that they have nothing to say about how they feel.

As a seasoned early years practitioner, trainer, consultant and author, I am proud to have started this thing and to still be introducing it to settings and children nearly two decades later. Long may it continue.

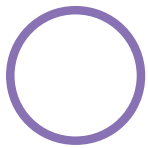
Visit [playingtolearn.co.uk](https://www.playingtolearn.co.uk)



MOLLY POTTER IS A QUALIFIED TEACHER AND BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

How do we teach consent?

Molly Potter shares tips on teaching children to protect their own boundaries and respect those of others...



ur relationship with the word “no” can be complex. As children, many of us picked up the message that saying

no, refusing or declining was not the right thing to do! So with this in mind, how do we talk to children about the times when it is totally okay, or in fact, a good idea, to say “no”?

Consent is all about protecting our boundaries: the imaginary line over which people should not cross without first receiving permission. With adults these relate to unreasonable expectations, inconsiderate assumptions and/or actions that intrude on our physical and mental comfort. With children, however, the boundaries they might struggle with tend to relate to touch, personal space, use of possessions, not taking turns, sharing others’ information, exerting aggression and ignoring “stop” or “no”.

Confusion sometimes arises with consent when we think it’s just about empowering children to say no without defining the times that are not a matter of consent – such as when a trusted adult asks you to do something that keeps you healthy, safe or helps you learn/do something useful! This can be explored with children by considering why adults ask children to do a variety of things. For example:

- Clean your teeth
- Go to bed at bedtime
- Help with the washing up
- Walk when you cross the road
- Tidy your room
- Don’t eat too many sweets
- Get ready for school

To teach young children about consent we need to consider the idea



being hugged by others or hugging others at nursery and school. The same applies to all kinds of touching.

Next I explore other actions that might also need consent. As a general rule, if it’s an action that could affect another’s body, feelings or belongings, we need to ask for consent. If it’s a choice that only affects us or that’s about being respectful or kind to others, it’s not usually a matter for consent. I would jumble up the following and ask children if they think each action would require consent or not:

Probably needs consent

(could make someone feel uncomfortable)

- Tickling someone
- Sitting really closely to someone
- Drinking water from someone else’s water bottle
- Sharing someone’s address
- Sharing someone’s news that they told you
- Making up and using a nickname for someone

Unlikely to need consent

(very unlikely to make someone uncomfortable)

- Saying hello to someone
- Waving to someone
- Asking someone who looks sad if they are okay
- Deciding you don’t want to play a game any more
- Going and sitting quietly on a bench

I also spend some time considering the need to respect another person’s “no” when they say it, as this can feel like a rejection to some children. I make



repeatedly finding a new person to pair up with and taking it in turns to ask one of the questions listed in the table below. The person they ask can either give permission (in which case they carry out the action listed) or they don't, to which the other child needs to respond with, "I understand." I use picture prompts to give a "menu" of the different questions.

I finish the lesson by asking children to complete the sentence start, "Consent (or asking permission) is important..." in as many different ways as they can!

I always start with the idea of hugs and how welcome they might be

it clear if someone says no, it doesn't mean they don't like you; it just means they are not comfortable with what you have asked. If you respect them, they will respect you. Consent is all about treating each other with respect.

Finally, I play an experiential game where children practise getting, giving and respecting consent. I explain they are going to wander around the room

RESPECTING OTHERS

Consent is key in helping children maintain respectful interactions within relationships as they increasingly learn to consider the impact of their behaviour on others. When children understand and respect the need for giving and getting consent, they are more likely to become adults who will:

- no longer make assumptions about what's acceptable
- have a clear idea of situations that require consent
- consider the feelings of others more
- feel more empowered to say no when it's appropriate
- have greater respect for their own and others' boundaries and comfort

TEACHING EXPECTATIONS

When children first arrive at nursery, they can initially struggle with the changes in expectations of behaviour in school compared with home. In other words, the boundaries with respect to touch, what's kept private and who is allowed to help with personal care can change. The best approach is to teach expectations through (brave) direct communication, such as, "We don't touch ourselves between our legs when at nursery. That's private – which means we don't do it where others can see us."

To support children with learning about consent in greater detail, the reassuring and empowering book *It's OK to Say No* by Molly Potter explores feeling comfortable/uncomfortable, when consent is needed, when you should give consent, how to ask for consent and much more. Visit mollypotter.com

Question seeking consent	If consent is given	If consent is not given
Can I take your photo?	Ask them to smile and pretend to take their photo.	Say, "I understand."
Can I give you a hug?	Give them a gentle hug.	
Can I share your news?	Mime shouting to everyone.	
Can I hold your hand?	Hold hands and skip for a few steps.	
Can I borrow your pencil?	Pretend to take a pencil and mime writing their name.	
Can I tickle you?	Tickle them on their forearm.	
Can I comb your hair?	Pretend to comb their hair.	
Do you want to hold this worm?	Pretend to put a worm in their hand.	
Can I call you "buddy"?	Say, "Hello, buddy."	



LISA LODGE IS AN EARLY YEARS CONSULTANT

Share the news in nursery

*Current affairs can inspire learning in all areas of your setting,
say **Lisa Lodge** and **Katie Naughton**...*

What springs to mind when you think about current affairs? 10pm news broadcasts, shocking headlines, politics, world problems? How can this possibly be suitable for children, especially the youngest in school?

In today's digital world, the news travels fast – it's accessible to everyone, including young children. They're inevitably exposed to what's happening around the globe, whether via overhearing adult conversations, encountering snippets from TV and radio, or through conversations with peers in the playground. Accessing fragmented details like this may lead to children receiving inaccurate or inappropriate information, often beyond their understanding, which can promote a range of emotional responses. Information from the news can unnerve, worry or scare children. As teachers, we can practise techniques to acknowledge and deal with current affairs appropriately – this doesn't need to be off-limits in the early years.

WHERE DO WE START?

We're often unaware of just how much early years pupils know about the news. An important first step of productive real-world learning is teaching children to ask questions about information they've encountered – whether it concerns or interests them. Providing

opportunities for children to do this in a safe environment with trusted adults strengthens teacher-pupil relations. In an effort to promote transparency, this practice shows children that, even from a young age, they can ask anything, they will be listened to, and their questions will be answered. As teachers, we can prioritise honesty while weighing up the level of detail to share, considering children's age and developmental stage. Providing reassurance is key, but shying away from important, real-world conversations can be damaging. Open and measured discussions can provide clarity and relief and prevent young children bottling up worries about what's happening in the world.

Instead of waiting for children to divulge snippets of news they've heard, we can actively introduce current affairs into the classroom. Thinking about the needs and interests of your group, select stories that will inspire and facilitate learning opportunities. News can be anything happening in the world now, whether local or global. Whatever your focus, stories allow early years children to find out more about themselves, invigorate existing interests, or spark new ones. Imagine the impact a story about a shipwreck discovery could have on a child who loves boats, or a child who constantly talks about animals finding out about endangered wildlife in the news!

You've found a news story you want to share. Now what? Try teaching with images from the news. Acting as stimuli for speaking and listening practice, pictures encourage children to talk about what they can see, what they like or dislike, and what they think is happening. A child can identify something they relate to. This creates further opportunities to practise sharing knowledge or

experiences with others, and allows us as adults to discover more about them. Inspired by news-based visuals, children can develop





KATIE NAUGHTON IS AN EDUCATION CONTENT WRITER

early literacy skills, such as speaking in sentences, actively listening, and taking turns in conversations. Simply allowing children to talk freely about their own lives or thoughts helps conversations flow and feel easier and relevant to them. Some love sharing their knowledge and ideas, while some speak up because they care about a topic.

Of course, with exposure to varied news stories and related discussion, children naturally encounter new words, enhancing spoken vocabulary. Hearing new words when learning about a news story provides opportunities to discuss what words mean, and connect them to real-life contexts. After inspiring conversations, children often lead their own play based on the story's theme, or if they

News can be anything happening in the world now

are not quite there yet, adults can set challenges. A story about a space mission could perhaps encourage children to take on the roles of astronauts blasting off into space, or a story about a sportsperson may prompt children to try out the sport for themselves. Adults facilitating this play can model using newly introduced words, deepening children's understanding and embedding new terms into their everyday vocabulary.

UNDERSTANDING & EMPATHY

News topics can inspire all areas of your setting. Every early years practitioner loves to see children motivated to mark make and write, and when children are inspired about something that is happening right now, there are chances to write for *real* purposes. It could be that, upon hearing about someone challenging themselves to visit every country without using a plane, children think about their own adventures and write a list of what to pack for their travels. Or, a news story about a theme park opening might inspire children to draw and label their ideas about what the park should include. Doing so can give meaning to writing practice, supporting



children to put pencil to paper, mark make, and explain their work.

Embedding current affairs exploration encourages young children to talk about how topics make them feel, and therefore supports emotional literacy development. Expressing feelings with peers in a safe space demonstrates a spectrum of responses, showing we each respond differently to news and events, which is something children can learn to respect. Deciphering responses to the news helps children relate feelings to emotional vocabulary, laying foundations to recognise, identify and express feelings. This can help you broaden children's vocabulary, from simply using "happy" and "sad" to advancing to more complex words, such as "angry", "confused", "excited", "worried", and "surprised".

This all contributes to exercising empathy. Exploring topical themes both supports each child's understanding of their own lives and experiences and enhances learning about the lives of others and builds cultural capital. Looking at real depictions of people and groups enables children to observe how their situations can be similar to or different from others'. With real-life context from the news, children can learn about and respect diversity, including families, cultures, and religions. Highlighting variety in this way helps shape children into empathetic, open-minded citizens, embedding positive attributes.

Bringing these learning objectives to life through a current affairs lens supports children to learn about the

world in real time and keeps their education engaging. Ultimately, for all of us, our key focus rests on helping children understand and discover the world, give purpose to learning and support their development, ready to move through school. And if we can achieve this through fresh, topical focuses, then our children's progression will be better for it!

FIND OUT MORE

Picture News Early Years is a weekly news resource supporting children's understanding of the world around them. Every pack includes real-life images, open questions, provision area ideas, key vocabulary words, and more. To access a free resource to try with your class, email help@picture-news.co.uk with the exclusive code **TEACHEY**.

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Ideas for introducing news in the early years...

Cover a range of stories

Sometimes you can be surprised by which stories inspire children the most!

Share child-friendly images

This starts conversations and allows children to make their own links to what they can see.

Make time to ask questions

Ensure details shared are accurate and age-appropriate, with opportunities to discuss what's happening.

Explore topical themes

Whether it's role play, writing for real purposes, or building in the construction area, let children lead. Their ideas are always the best!



LAURA DOCKRILL IS AN AWARD-WINNING CHILDREN'S AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR

“No one spoke to us about mental health”

*Knowledge is power, so let's prepare our children for the challenges they may encounter as adults, says **Laura Dockrill**...*



GAPS IN OUR KNOWLEDGE

Fast forward to my early 30s, and I am becoming a mum for the first time. In the aftermath of a chaotic birth I am hit with a severe mental illness called postpartum psychosis (don't worry, I hadn't heard of it either until it tried to kill me). The illness came on thick and fast, including a whole host of unpleasant symptoms: racing and intrusive thoughts, extreme anxiety, depression, paranoia, delusions and insomnia – the yummy list goes on – and, when my newborn son was just three weeks old, I woke up on my first Mother's Day (I know, you really couldn't write it) in a psychiatric ward, separated from my baby. I had never known shame like it.

Thanks to medication, therapy and support from loved ones, I got better. But recovery is not linear or something you can just add hot water to and stir. A lot of it was spent scrabbling around in the darkness wondering how I'd got so sick and how to get out of it, mentally weightlifting, desperately floundering, pretending to be okay when I wasn't – all whilst caring for a newborn, recovering from major surgery, and trying to navigate motherhood.

All I kept thinking was: *How did they not teach this in school?*

This was not something that could be measured with a goddamn protractor, and yet we spent a *lot* of time with one of those.

Let me begin by saying I know it's getting so much better. My seven-year-old teaches me breathing skills and “brain breaks” that he's learned from his (awesome) teacher; his classroom has a “feelings wall”. I also appreciate how under strain teachers are, but ultimately, teacher-pupil relationships and peer bonding can only be improved by openness and

At primary school I learned loads of important and brilliant stuff, skills to set me up for life: how to tie my shoelaces, how to tell the time, and – no matter how tempting – *not* to stick my finger into the pencil sharpener. I learned about Greek mythology and the Thames Barrier. We grasped maths by sharing imaginary sweets, attempted our own “Picassos”, took great care of our pet stick insects. I learned the names of the planets, that a flower needs water and sunlight to grow, and that footballs really hurt if they hit you in the face. I learned how to bake flapjacks and, for the deep sorrow of everyone around

me, play the recorder. One quiet afternoon, to demonstrate light and shape, our teacher closed the curtains, turned off the big lights, set up a projector in the hall, and we chalked up our silhouettes – it was actual theatre. I made my first proper friend in my Reception class, and we are still best friends to this day. And I fell head over heels in love with the book corner, story time and writing creatively.

It *all* starts in the classroom. Anything is possible. The seeds are planted in those early years, and if nurtured with the right teacher, who knows what blossoming trees can grow? I truly believe I am a writer now because of my love for books as a kid.

shared wisdom. Let me be the Ghost of Christmas Past: in the same way I have never needed a compass in my adult life, no adult ever spoke to us at school about mental health. My understanding of mental illness was a vague, patchy mismatch of covered ears and closed eyes, leaving the gaps to be filled by over-sensationalised, terrifying horror movies. Had I the tools to at least try and describe my symptoms I might've stood a fighting chance, asked for help sooner, been diagnosed and treated more quickly. I had no awareness, no idea that it was even possible to get so sick from something as everyday as having a baby. I misunderstood mental illness because I was essentially miseducated.

I get it – illness is scary; we don't like to talk about it because we don't want to scare people. Especially children. But illness is a part of life. It doesn't discriminate and nobody is immune. By silencing these conversations, we are disarming young people and only inflaming the shame and stigma. It doesn't have to be scary; it can be comforting. Knowledge is power. So, let's throw light onto the darkness.

Illness is a part of life. It doesn't discriminate

LEARNING TO ASK FOR HELP

Other than bonding with my beautiful boy, two of the main healers that transformed my recovery were, firstly, reading accounts of lived experiences of anybody going through anything hard and coming through it, and then going on to write my own memoir, *What Have I Done?* These conversations broke the silence around the illness. And secondly, learning Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. CBT is like learning a new language. It's tough to retrain your brain, but the neuro pathway of a well-trodden path can become overgrown, and there are smoother, easier, safer ways to walk. It's all a work in process, and as my dad says, "Every day is a school day."

With my book *Big Thoughts* I wanted to bring these two powerful tools – storytelling and CBT – together to create a practical and comforting



read that could open up conversations and get young people in the habit of reframing their thoughts and emotions.

I am now grateful for the illness because I am a better parent because of it. I'm emotionally engaged and conscious, and best of all, I practise CBT with my seven-year-old son because I don't want him to have to fix the roof in a thunderstorm like I did. Just this year in his school report, our proudest comment was his teacher saying how articulate he was with his emotions. I tell my son about what happened to us after he was born, not to frighten him or burden him but to protect and empower him. There is empathy, kindness, compassion, relatability and even humour to be found in these conversations.

The best way to learn ourselves is to teach – so, let's pass on the golden power of *asking for help* and caring for our mental health; being kinder to ourselves will only bring out the kindness in us all.



***Big Thoughts: Catch and Release Your Worries* (Walker Books), written by Laura Dockrill and illustrated by Ashling Lindsay, will be available from 25**

September 2025. Visit walker.co.uk

RECOMMENDED READS

Ten empathetic and practical titles to share with your children...

- *A Totally Big Umbrella* – Sarah Crossan & Rebecca Cobb
- *Sad Book* – Michael Rosen & Quentin Blake
- *Where Did She Go?* – Ciarad Lloyd & Tom Percival
- *Let The Light Pour In* – Lemn Sissay (not a picture book but short poems)
- *Love From Alfie McPoonst* – Dawn McNiff & Patricia Metola
- *Terrible Horses* – Raymond Antrobus & Ken Wilson Max
- *When I see Red* – Britta Teckentrup
- *A Lion in Paris* – Beatrice Alemagna
- *Little Mouse's Big Book of Fears* – Emily Gravett
- *What to do when you worry too much* – Dawn Huebner & Bonnie Matthews



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

There's lots to Learn at the Library

*These free, local resources offer countless opportunities to support development and promote a love of reading, says **Karen Hart**...*

I recently accompanied a nursery group of two- and three-year-olds on a visit to our local library. Given their previous visit had been to a big park with a sandpit, lots of climbing frames and a twirly slide, I was wondering if this outing might fall a bit flat, but I couldn't have been more wrong!

Before the visit we talked to the children about libraries, and although everyone had visited the library before, not many appeared to borrow books regularly. We talked about the types of things that go on in our library, which in common with many others these days organises mother and toddler groups, play days, and special holiday activities – children loved to share their stories. We also talked about not running and shouting in the library, as people would be working on computers and reading, while explaining that walking and talking is fine.

When we got there, the first thing children wanted to do was have a good sort through all the books – a little activity in its own right. In nursery, they had been looking at animals that hatch out of eggs, so I suggested that if anyone found any books about animals that lay eggs, these could be good ones to borrow. It was a treasure hunt from that moment on, and we found some really good books on the subject to take back with us.

Once we had a pile of interesting books, I read some to the children. There was a real mixture, including stories from well-known CBeebies TV shows, books about bugs, and an activity book about going to the dentist, with everyone wanting a turn at pulling the tabs and lifting the flaps.

We finished our visit by having a walk around the library to see the various areas: the adult book section, the computer and photocopier area,

the librarian's area in the middle, and the information section with lots of free leaflets about activities in the borough, etc. We took some interesting leaflets back to the nursery with us to look at later. Every child was allowed to choose one book to take back to nursery with them, which children checked out themselves using the automated book scanner – a new little skill they accomplished.

Back at the nursery, we talked about our outing, read some of our chosen books (with others put aside for the rest of the week), looked at the leaflets, and talked about everything we'd seen. The visit was a real success – a local outing that was completely free and left children with a sense

of accomplishment through making choices, using new technology, and learning about a specific kind of building. I asked children why they thought we had libraries, and one little girl said, "To give everyone a nice day," which I suppose is the right answer!

LEARNING TO LOVE READING

Library visits cover multiple areas of development, from walking to the site with friends (personal, social and emotional development) to looking at books and listening to stories (communication and language), but the biggest benefit is their potential to sow the seeds of a lifelong love of reading.

The education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, recently urged parents



to “put their phones down and pick up a book” as part of a government campaign to improve reading habits and make more children school ready. The announcement comes as the government prepares to launch its Best Start in Life strategy, including new funding for partnerships between schools and local nurseries to “strengthen transitions into school and break down barriers from day one”.

“Every child was allowed to choose one book to take back to nursery

In support of this initiative, the Department for Education and the National Literacy Trust have joined forces to launch a National Year of Reading, starting in January 2026, to kickstart a reading revolution with the aim of reversing the decline in reading for pleasure among children and young people – just one in three aged eight to 18 said they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2025 (bit.ly/4mTn3KV).

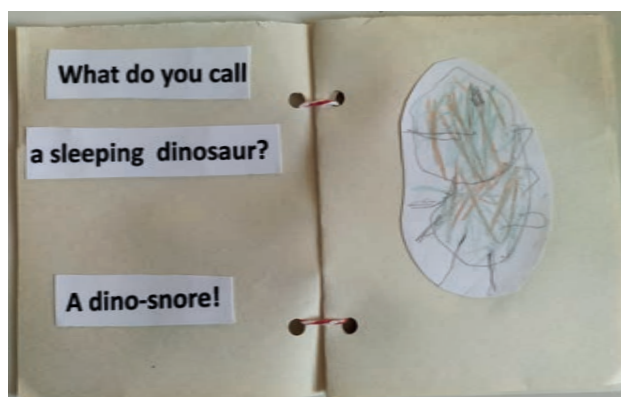
POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Make a joke book

After our visit we talked about all the different types of books there are: funny books, scary books, map books, guidebooks, etc. One type of book that might not be thought of is the joke book, and we had a lot of fun making some with our three-year-olds.

Begin by telling some jokes. Some good ones for this age group could be:

- Why didn't the skeleton go to the dance? *Because he had no body to go with!*
- How does the sea say hello? *It just waves!*
- What do you call a sleeping dinosaur? *A dino-snore!*
- What kind of flowers grow on your face? *Tu-lips!*
- What do you call a donkey with three legs? *A Wonkey!*



Go on to print these out so that everyone has a set of jokes.

We helped children make their own simple joke books by folding A5 sheets of paper in half and fixing these together with a length of string. Children then cut out the pre-printed jokes and glued each one onto a separate page in their books. They drew their own pictures on the pages next to the jokes so they could be “the illustrator”.

We finished our books by writing “Joke Book” on the cover and adding the child’s name as though they were the author, so they looked like the books we’d been looking at in nursery. Children traced over our writing for this.

Create a book club

For this activity, simply collect a selection of picture books, then once a week have a book-swap day, where children can choose a book to take home for the week. Ask parents if they can share the books with their children, which should be brought back in one week’s time to allow children to share their thoughts on what they borrowed during circle time.

This is a lovely activity for furthering communication and language and personal, social and emotional development by encouraging independent choosing and responsibility for looking after a borrowed object, and also helps to foster a love of books.



FIVE LIBRARY VISIT TIPS

1 Let the library know you’re planning a visit to make sure it doesn’t clash with other activities they may be holding. Some libraries will offer to hold a story-reading session for your children if they know in advance.

2 Use your visit to explore new vocabulary. Children love to learn words that seem grown-up, such as *librarian*, *author*, *illustrator*, *photocopier*, *fiction* and *non-fiction*. Don’t worry if they forget the new words; building vocabulary is all about increasing your connection with words organically over time.

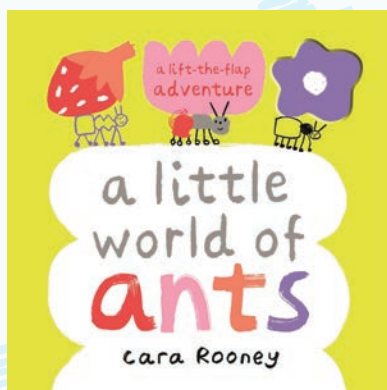
3 Allow children to take part in the checking-out and returning of books to encourage independence and autonomy.

4 Encourage children to make their own choices by picking books to look at and borrow, exerting their own preferences, and deciding for themselves which titles they are interested in.

5 Make your visits a regular occurrence. By familiarising themselves with the library, children begin to see themselves as readers and library-goers.

The Book Corner

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



A LITTLE WORLD OF ANTS

(Two Hoots, paperback, £7.99)

A Little World of Ants, written and illustrated by Cara Rooney, is a delightful, interactive picture book that will capture the curiosity of young readers. Using simple language and charming, childlike illustrations, it introduces children to the fascinating world of ants and other bugs in a way that's both playful and informative. Its pages are filled with engaging features that will keep little hands and minds busy: finger trails to follow, things to spot, and flaps to lift all add layers of fun, making each reading feel like a new adventure. These elements both support early learning and encourage children to look more closely at the natural world around them. This colourful adventure is sure to prompt outdoor explorations, inspiring children to search for ants and other bugs in their own gardens, parks or playgrounds. It is an ideal choice for sparking conversation and imaginative play, as well as the perfect text to support any planning on minibeasts in your setting.



ONCE I WAS A TREE

(Nosy Crow, hardback, £12.99)

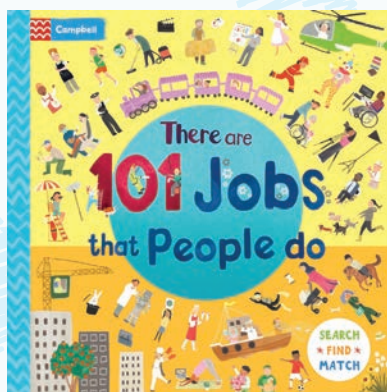
This humorous but poignant picture book by Eoin McLaughlin invites children to wonder, if trees could talk, what would they say? Narrated by the tree itself, the story brings the personality and character of a tree to life in a creative way as it shares memories and tells us about the friends it makes along the way, from tiny seed to the paper for a book. Each friend has a role in shaping the story, from animals to people, and their interactions highlight the importance of relationships and change. Guilherme Karsten's double-page illustrations are rich with detail, offering lots to spot, and will prompt conversation long after the story ends. It all adds up to a title that's not only entertaining but also informative, sparking curiosity about nature and storytelling. McLaughlin cleverly reiterates the value of books as a way of preserving memories and connections. Both children and adults will find it a memorable read that blends humour, heart, and gentle reflection in equal measure.



IS IT ASLEEP?

(Gecko Press, hardback, £12.99)

Is It Asleep? by Olivier Tallec is a tender and thought-provoking picture book that tackles a challenging and abstract topic in a sensitive way. Through captivating illustrations, Tallec conveys big emotions and characterisation that brings warmth and depth to the story. At its heart, this is a tale that explores how children can begin negotiating their feelings and having difficult conversations about loss. It approaches the theme of remembrance thoughtfully, offering young readers a safe space to wonder, reflect and talk; the caring friends we meet support one another, showing empathy and kindness that your charges will easily connect with. This is a moving story that can facilitate discussions between adults and children, making it a valuable resource for both home and classroom settings – it may be particularly useful in helping families looking for ways to approach what are difficult subjects with gentleness and honesty.



THERE ARE 101 JOBS THAT PEOPLE DO IN THIS BOOK

(Campbell Books, board book, £9.99)

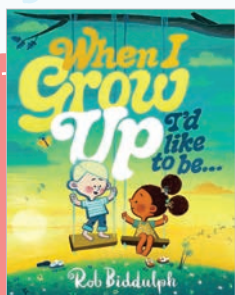
This is a lively and engaging introduction to the world of work and careers, perfect for curious young readers. Split into categories, including “People who help us”, “In the country”, and “Lights, camera, action”, it showcases a wide range of roles, from the familiar (chef, farmer, mechanic) to more imaginative or unexpected jobs like busker, robot developer, and dog walker. The detailed scenes are set across sturdy board-back pages, making this a durable as well as a visually rich read. Each page is full of action and character, encouraging children to point out details, ask questions, and make connections to the world around them – wonderful for inspiring conversation and language while supporting imaginative play. Its variety and detail ensure that children will return to it again and again, spotting new things each time.



LITTLE SNAIL GOES HOUSE-HUNTING

(Happy Yak, paperback, £7.99)

In Bia Melo’s funny and warm picture book, we follow an adventurous snail in search of the perfect home. Along the way, Little Snail tries hanging upside down, exploring underground, and even squeezing into a cocoon, but none of these options quite work out. The humour in these trials will delight children, while the snail’s determination makes for a charming and relatable character. The bright illustrations are full of little details that invite children to look closer and spot new things each time they revisit the story. These visual touches add to the playfulness of the narrative and bring the snail’s world vividly to life. At its heart, the story gently reminds readers that the best place to be is often the one that feels most comfortable and true to yourself – a lovely tale for sharing, sparking conversation, and enjoying together.



WHEN I GROW UP I'D LIKE TO BE...

(Harper Collins Children's Books)

Explore hopes and dreams for the future, from adventures in space to scientific discoveries!

- Set up your role-play area with a wealth of different resources and props related to jobs. Children could experiment with stethoscopes, compasses, bandages, ballet shoes and hard hats.
- Simple boxes are great for inspiring creativity. Perhaps it will become a space rocket, a pirate ship, or a rally car.
- Engage in discussion about what children want to be when they grow up. Link in mathematics by using a tally chart to keep a check of the responses, adding them up to find the most popular job.

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Have you seen these fantastic publications?

Hank Goes Peck

(Little Tiger, board book, £7.99)

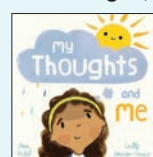


Maudie Powell-Tuck and Duncan Beedie’s *Hank Goes Peck* is a lively and mischievous tale that will have children laughing

out loud. With clever peep-through pages, young readers can follow Hank as he pecks a hole in the trampoline and the sheep’s knitting, and even dares to peck the angry bull. Full of humour and energy, this playful story is perfect for sharing and guaranteed to entertain again and again.

My Thoughts and Me

(Little Tiger, paperback, £7.99)



Nima Patel’s text covers negative self-talk and troubling thoughts in an age-appropriate way, making it an invaluable

resource for supporting wellbeing. With diverse characterisation, it reflects a wide range of experiences and helps every child feel seen. The story introduces a simple grounding technique that children can try themselves, while also inspiring conversation between adults and young readers.

Clive Penguin Learns to Fly, Sort of

(Little Tiger, hardback, £12.99)



Clive dreams of soaring through the skies and, despite a few wobbles along the way, refuses to give up, providing us

with a humorous and uplifting story about determination and resilience. Children will be captivated by Ben Sanders’ bold illustrations, which bring Clive’s antics and optimism to life. Funny, heartwarming and inspiring, this is a celebration of trying, learning and believing in yourself.

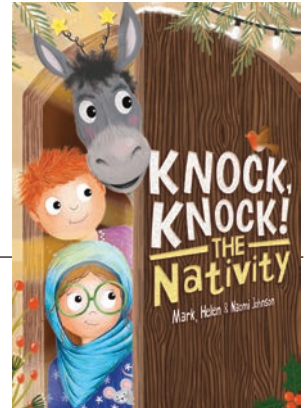
MUSIC

Knock, Knock! The Nativity

Visit: Outoftheark.com

A gentle, joyful and wonderfully inclusive nativity perfect for Reception and beyond

Out of the Ark Music



AT A GLANCE

- Designed for ages 4–7, with both speaking and non-speaking roles
- Flexible casting options to suit small or large cohorts
- Includes instrumental and vocal tracks, staging and prop ideas
- Clear, engaging script with age-appropriate humour
- Makaton signing videos and classroom resources included

REVIEWED BY EMMA THOMPSON



“The tone of the show is spot-on for younger children”

Putting on a nativity in Reception and Key Stage 1 is no small feat. At the end of a long term, with tired teachers and excitable children, you need something that’s easy to use, inclusive, and full of heart. *Knock, Knock! The Nativity* from Out of the Ark delivers exactly that.

Everything you need is here, either as a physical book and CD or through their brilliantly user-friendly online portal. It’s an all-in-one package that lets you get started straight away. From vocal and backing tracks to lyric displays, character lists, and stage directions, it’s all there, ready to grab and go. For Reception teachers juggling a million things at once, that kind of support is a real gift.

The character list is particularly helpful, with a mix of speaking and non-speaking roles, and suggestions for how parts can be adapted depending on your cohort. Whether you’re working with a single class or combining year groups, you can easily scale the production up or down. The script even includes the option for narrators to read lines from a book, which is ideal for little ones still building confidence.

Like all Out of the Ark productions, the songs are a real highlight. They’re catchy, cheerful and just right for younger voices. “Our Sheepy Sheep” has been playing in my head all week, and I don’t mind one

bit. The lyrics are simple to learn, and the melodies are joyful without being overwhelming. The children will pick them up quickly and absolutely love performing them.

Another thoughtful element is the inclusion of Makaton signing videos for each of the songs. It’s a feature that not only makes the performance more inclusive but also helps every child feel part of the show. It’s a great way to build confidence and connection across the whole cohort.

I also love how Out of the Ark shares how to link the nativity back to wider classroom learning. You’re given a dedicated document full of EYFS-friendly ideas that connect beautifully with the show. It really reflects the ethos of early years learning and demonstrates just how much thought and care goes into the planning. One of my favourites is a geography activity where children can draw a map showing the different journeys taken by the nativity characters, marking north, south, east and west and including the star.

There’s also loads of support for staging, costumes and props, from simple angel halos and star tabards to scrolls, signs, and even a stable door. These ideas are practical and realistic, with nothing that will require midnight crafting

marathons.

The tone of the show is spot-on for younger children. It mixes traditional elements with a few silly surprises (the sheep are scene-stealers) and creates a performance that will have families smiling from start to finish.

THE VERDICT

- ✓ Easy to use and stress-free to organise
- ✓ Adaptable for different class sizes
- ✓ Songs children love and learn quickly
- ✓ Packed with EYFS-friendly learning links
- ✓ Genuinely inclusive and full of heart

UPGRADE IF...

...you want a stress-free, age-appropriate nativity packed with charm, great songs, and everything you need to create a magical Christmas performance.

SUSTAINABILITY

Kapow Primary Sustainability Collection

Sign up for a free trial at tinyurl.com/tp-KapowSustainability or email enquiries@kapowprimary.com

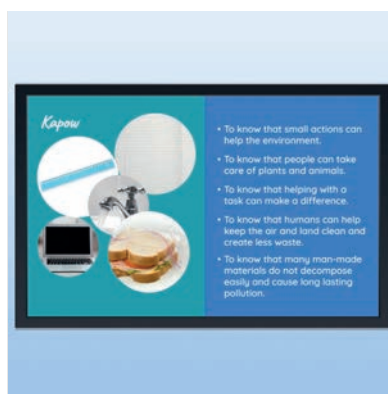
A must-have for supporting your school's sustainability teaching and strategy



AT A GLANCE

- Highly engaging sustainability lesson plans for Reception to Year 6
- Packed with practical resources to prepare children for a sustainable future
- A cohesive and interdisciplinary approach for maximum impact
- Full of deep-dive questions and activities to promote eco-thinking
- Brilliantly compiled content

REVIEWED BY JOHN DABELL



Developing and implementing a sustainability curriculum across the school is an enormous undertaking. This is a multifaceted topic full of complex concepts scattered across different subjects that are difficult to grasp with many hidden components, and so age-appropriate resources are key. Sustainability has to be taught in authentic contexts and connect with the real-world experiences of children.

Fortunately, Kapow Primary has a Sustainability Collection admirably fit for purpose that serves the whole school using a holistic, cross-curricular approach that fosters a sense of responsibility and global citizenship. It is well-rounded and offers engaging, clear, and highly relevant lessons that progressively build understanding to help children become change makers.

The Sustainability Collection provides children with plenty of opportunities to link their learning to a variety of issues that mean something to them, their families and communities. It is solutions and action based. The sustainability concepts covered include appreciation of nature, interdependence, resources and waste, climate change, individual and collective responsibility.

This broad and balanced collection has been very carefully structured and provides creative and engaging lesson plans along with supporting resources. They contain pre-lesson videos and prep, key vocabulary, teacher notes, activities, support and challenge.

Each of the lessons have been well set up. Learning objectives and success criteria are followed by engaging videos for teachers and children and they are the perfect introduction

to the topic. They are clear, engaging and well presented.

Before the lesson, there is a teacher knowledge section that highlights the key need-to-know bits along with cross-curricular links and pointers. There are lots of exciting downloadable 'print in advance' resources to furnish each lesson, too, so you have everything to hand. These are integral to the main lesson and have been well thought through with high engagement and collaborative endeavour at their heart.

Each lesson has been brilliantly constructed with recap and recall sections, presentations, attention-grabbing slides and inspiring videos, main event activities and further slides. Wrapping up activities are included with 'during the week' activities to focus on, and there are also tips for adaptive teaching and notes on assessing progress and understanding.

These lessons help children to weigh evidence, form opinions, present their thinking, draw conclusions, and consider how and why others might see and do things differently. They also encourage empowerment over fear and so have the potential to activate pupil leaders to drive sustainability, steer change, and become advocates for a greener future.

The Sustainability Collection helps children understand why they are studying the topic and its relevance to their own lives. It teaches them how to debate, listen and assess alternative points of view, and judge for themselves the relative merits of different views.

Sustainability is commonly seen as an add-on that must compete for time within an already crowded curriculum, but Kapow makes

teaching it a key competency and an integral part of the curriculum. This is a must-have for your sustainability lead and your school's sustainability and climate change strategy.

THE VERDICT

- ✓ Accessible and engaging
- ✓ Promotes autonomous critical thinking and collaborative problem solving
- ✓ Inspires hope and helps children have agency and take action
- ✓ Promotes safeguarding and wellbeing by combatting eco-anxiety
- ✓ Supports a holistic view of sustainability
- ✓ Develops responsibility and global citizenship
- ✓ Bolsters confidence in teachers
- ✓ Perfect for auditing and setting up a Sustainability Club

UPGRADE IF...

...you are looking for a coordinated, comprehensive and creative whole-school approach to teaching sustainability and creating a sustainable school eco-culture and community.

No more lost property!

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is all you need

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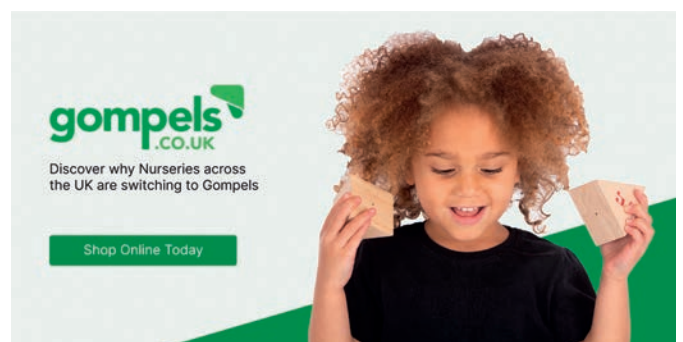
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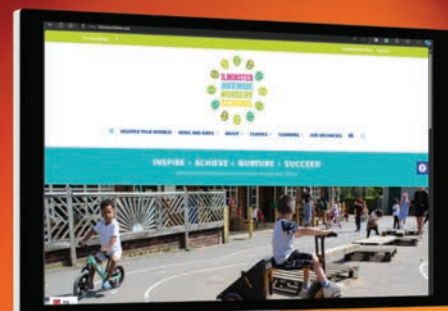
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Expert advice from...



ANNE MCCONWAY

is a lecturer in early childhood, development and learning



STELLA ZIOLKOWSKI

is NDNA's director of quality and training



**JAMES HEMPSALL
OBE**

is managing director of Coram Hemsall's

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Three titles to inform and improve your team's practice, covering topics as diverse as schemas and observing children's play.

Sign up for fully funded Maths Champions Programme with NDNA

Support early years practitioners with their confidence and ability to teach maths to children in early years settings.

Maths Champions is an evidence-based, professional development programme delivered by National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA). It is aimed at increasing early years practitioner skills, knowledge, awareness and confidence in supporting children's early mathematical development.

The Maths Champions programme is a fully funded initiative. The only criteria for nurseries is that Maths Champions must be at least Level 3 qualified.

Commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation, the independent evaluation team from the Universities of Durham and York analysed the results of the programme, which showed that children in a setting that ran the programme made on average three months additional progress in maths and language development.

“Children are not born with maths anxiety; they learn this from adults surrounding them. Evaluation of the Maths Champions programme provides evidence to show increased confidence levels of all staff in participating settings in providing high quality educational experiences for children within their everyday routine.”

+ **Stella Ziolkowski**
NDNA's Director of Quality and Training

To register your interest, fill out the following form:



Education
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Foundation





“Clean indoor air should be a priority”

The early days of the pandemic were an extraordinary challenge for those in the early years sector. During lockdown, many settings remained open to support key worker families. Practitioners then juggled rapidly changing guidance, enhanced cleaning protocols, and the uncertainty of an evolving public health crisis, all while continuing to care for our youngest children.

Cleanliness was a central focus. Settings increased surface cleaning, implemented strict hygiene routines, and followed new protocols to reduce transmission. But one crucial aspect was largely overlooked: the air we breathe. No amount of handwashing prevents us from breathing in viral particles.

According to government Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) guidance, improving ventilation and monitoring indoor air quality is required. Yet in practice, how many settings are regularly checking indoor air? How many are actively improving it? It is a vital question, especially when you consider that children inhale around 10,000 litres of air each day. And yet, as physicist André Henriques from CERN once pointed out, if you asked a room full of adults what a child needs, clean air would probably not even make the list. It's time that changed.

Covid is still here

Covid-19 continues to circulate at high levels all year round, causing repeated waves of illness and disruption. And contrary to popular belief, it *does* pose a threat to young children. In the year leading up to August 2023, 6,300 babies under the age of one were hospitalised due to Covid in the UK. It was found that 1% of *all* babies under six months old required hospital care, giving them a *higher* hospitalisation rate than adults over 90.

And the risks aren't limited to acute illness. A Swedish study recently reported a 62% increase in type 1

diabetes diagnoses among children under five between 2018 and 2022. Researchers identified Covid's disruptive impact on the immune system as a likely factor. Meanwhile, in the United States, up to six million American children are now estimated to have long-term symptoms due to Covid, making it the most common chronic childhood illness, surpassing asthma.

Clean indoor air is one of the most powerful tools we have to reduce the spread of airborne viruses, including Covid, flu, RSV, measles, whooping cough, TB, meningitis, norovirus and many more.

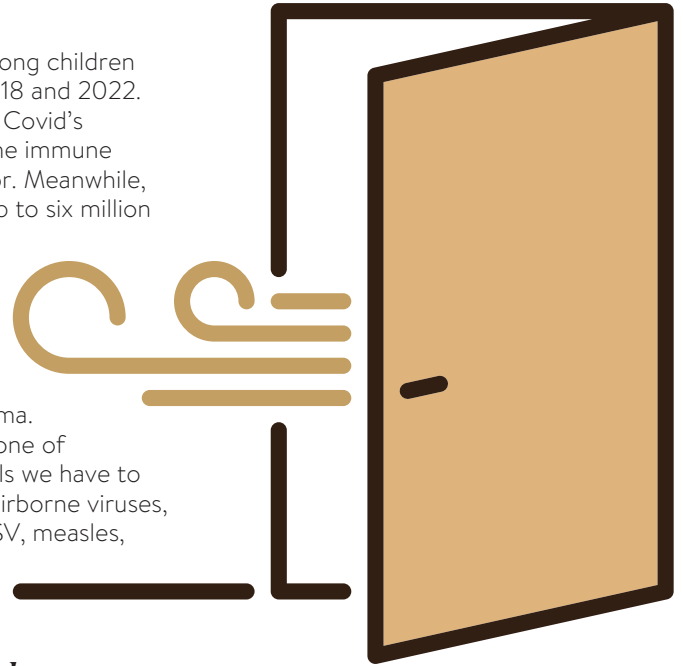
Air filters work

The good news is, improving indoor air quality is easier than you think. High-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters are scientifically proven to remove nearly *all* airborne pathogens. And their benefits go beyond infection control. HEPA filters also capture allergens like pollen and dust mites, mould spores, and microscopic particles from traffic pollution, elements that are especially damaging to developing lungs.

In a recent study in Finland, two daycares equipped with HEPA filters reported significant drops in staff and child illness. Absences fell by 30%, according to Dr Enni Sanmark from Helsinki University Hospital, who led the research.

Unlike schools, which are sometimes constrained by rigid policies and hierarchical decision-making processes, most early years settings belong to the PVI sector. This gives us the freedom and flexibility to act quickly. We can do this, and we can do it faster than anyone else.

It's also worth noting that many early years settings also operate as businesses. Clean indoor air offers a competitive advantage; it helps our teams, our business continuity, and our



reputations. Parents want reassurance that their child is safe and healthy. Being able to tell families that you are actively monitoring and cleaning the air their child breathes sends a powerful message: *we invest in and protect your children's health*. In a competitive landscape, that kind of reassurance is priceless.

What you can do

Monitor: CO₂ monitors are affordable and very easy to use. High CO₂ levels indicate that there is more of other people's exhaled air in the room. Aim for levels at or below 800 ppm.

Filter: Use HEPA air filters. Think of them as an immune system for your setting!

Ventilate: Open windows and doors regularly; natural ventilation disperses viral particles.

Communicate: Let parents and staff know what you're doing and why. Sharing your efforts builds trust, credibility, and a sense of shared responsibility.

Clean air is invisible, but its impact is not. It's time we made it a visible priority in every early years setting.



RECRUITMENT:

Strategies to support staff

When former Chancellor Jeremy Hunt announced his ambitious funded childcare expansion plans in his 2023 Budget speech, the early years sector reeled as the news sunk in. For a sector already beset with recruitment and retention challenges, most employers were immediately concerned with how they could find enough staff to meet demand and whether government funding would be increased enough to offer the salaries they deserved. The following year, the Department for Education (DfE) said that “around 35,000 additional staff” would be needed in addition to “the 31 December 2023 baseline for autumn 2025”. These new employees would be to support an expected 70,000 new places from this September.

The new Labour government’s plan to help the sector meet these targets was to create 100,000 places in school-based nurseries in areas of high demand. Ministers approved a new “experience-based route” that enables those who haven’t achieved the required qualifications yet to be included in the ratio at a manager’s discretion. While this may be helpful in meeting ratios, it is not creating new personnel and *is* creating more paperwork.

Labour’s other initiative, which we are awaiting further detail on, is to offer incentives for early years teachers of £4,500 to work in the 20 most disadvantaged areas. They have also announced new incentive payments of £1,000 to new starters in 38 priority areas. This follows on from the previous government’s incentive of £1,000 for new recruits once they

embarked on their first childcare role, which was trialled in 2024 across 19 local authority areas.

Alongside this financial bonus – rebuked by those already working in the sector as divisive – was their Do Something Big advertising campaign, aimed at attracting talent into an early years career. Its latest iteration focuses on attracting men into childcare roles.

Seek out mature employees who are new to the sector

Recruitment challenges

NDNA recently surveyed our members to find out how their recruitment efforts were going. Unsurprisingly, 70% of respondents did not have sufficient numbers of staff to operate at capacity. On average, nurseries had just over four unfilled vacancies each. More than half (54%) of the 714 providers surveyed still did not have enough practitioners to deliver 30 hours for all their two-year-olds, and 57% did not have capacity to offer 30 hours in their baby rooms. In a finding that should be shocking but won’t surprise many, 93% still needed to create more Level 3-qualified staff. Most sector leavers cited low pay and conditions as their main reason.

Significantly, the average nursery would be able to offer an additional 13 places if they had a full complement of staff members. This would be enough across the country to meet the DfE’s predicted demand. And yet, instead of supporting existing providers to meet

their workforce challenges, the current chancellor, Rachel Reeves, increased National Insurance contributions, making it much harder for nurseries to recruit. On top of that, the updated charging parents guidance, which emphasises the voluntary nature of charges, made it difficult for 79% to offer funded places.

The DfE will soon be responding to its consultation on indoor space requirements in the EYFS, which it ran as a potential means of increasing places by September 2025. If this results in more children being able to take up their place in a nursery, this could exacerbate staffing issues as nurseries strain to meet mandatory ratios. Without addressing the crucial workforce shortage, this policy could just add to employers’ headaches.

With expansion of two-year-old funded places taking place in Wales and on the horizon for Scotland, the recruitment and retention crisis is a UK-wide issue.

Addressing the issues

For the past few years, NDNA has been directly supporting nurseries across the UK with its supported employment programme, Childcare Works. With funding from several sources, the programme pays unemployed people with an interest in working with younger children to take part in a 16-week course of training, followed by a placement in a nursery. This has successfully encouraged under-represented groups into early years careers. Employers effectively trial a new employee without having any outlay themselves. In most cases, these trainees have gone on to work

either in the placement nursery or in a similar role within the sector.

Nurseries should also look at the role of apprentices in their settings and use them to plan their future workforce. This doesn't end with teenagers but apprentices of all ages, particularly those with experience in other sectors with transferable skills. Seek out mature employees who are new to the sector but have had their own families and understand the challenges that practitioners face supporting very young children. Consider how to frame your advertising to encourage local applicants – can they work favourable hours to give them a healthy work-life balance? Could you support their family commitments?

The new evidence-based route should in theory support nurseries to meet their ratios, but it's too new for us to give any insight into how

effective it will be. It is certainly worth exploring, especially for those members of staff with good experience who, for whatever reason, have not achieved a Level 3 qualification.

We also don't know yet how effective the Best Start in Life financial incentives are in encouraging new people into the workforce, but we

are keeping a close eye on this. If these schemes work, we need to see more investment so they can be widened to include applicants across the country.

NDNA continues to develop training to support nurseries in upskilling their existing workforce, especially popular courses such as baby and toddler room leader

courses, specifically designed with the expansion in mind. We offer this training in cost-effective bundles so nurseries can afford to train up their whole staff team. Take advantage of our fully funded Maths Champions

93%
*Nurseries
that need
more Level 3
staff*

SOURCE: NDNA

programme open to all early years settings, a chance to upskill staff and boost confidence in their maths skills.

Although there's no simple solution to the staffing problem, there are many measures employers can take to attract and retain more people. Together, these can make a real difference.

Visit ndna.org.uk

STEPS TO SUCCESS

How to attract and retain loyal employees...

- **Invest in CPD** – give your people a plan for future development with milestones and goals that are achievable and measurable.
- **The Institute of Early Years Education can help** – membership is free and includes a wide range of resources, activity ideas, CPD and support.
- **Health and wellbeing** – enabling staff to achieve a healthy work-life balance is crucial, as it will reduce absence through illness and stress and help them to enjoy being part of your team. The Anna Freud Centre has resources for supporting staff wellbeing: tinyurl.com/TEYafRW
- **Look at your rota** – could you deploy your staff more effectively? Think about whether you could give them more time away from the setting with longer days.
- **What non-pay incentives can they benefit from?** There are a number of employee discount schemes you could take advantage of that staff will really appreciate. This includes cheaper childcare in your setting.
- **Blue Light Card** – make sure your staff are aware of these offers as educators.





JAMES HEMPSALL OBE IS MANAGING DIRECTOR OF CORAM HEMPSALL'S

Making the best of Best Start in Life

Around the start of the summer holidays, the government published its long-awaited Best Start in Life strategy. We were expecting it to arrive in the autumn, so its early release took us all by surprise. If you didn't manage to read it by the end of term, or didn't take it as your holiday reading, or have been too busy working across the summer, I'm here to help with the main points and some things to do now or to think ahead about.

What's in it?

The Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, has said on numerous occasions that early years is her "number one priority". This strategy sets out the first steps in her promise for a decade of renewal. Building on the commitments made in the Plan for Change, it lays the foundations for further reform that will no doubt be gradually revealed in due course. The DfE says it will spend close to £1.5 billion in England over the next three years on improving family services and early years education; here we focus on the headlines as we know them so far:

Places and entitlements: continuing the rollout of 30 hours of government-funded early education and childcare from nine months old for eligible working parents, and increasing the supply of term-time wraparound childcare. (The rollout out of free breakfast clubs in every primary school will also continue to grow.)

Sufficiency and support: shaping and supporting effective oversight at local or regional level to deliver the high-quality early education and childcare settings (including childminding) families need. This

includes creating more places where they are most needed, together with school-based nurseries.

Funding: a consultation over the next year on changes to how early years funding is allocated and distributed, to ensure it is matched to need and promotes workforce stability and quality provision, and achieves greater transparency from larger providers. More funding to promote inclusion and an expectation of better access for children with SEND.

Quality: working towards the target to increase the number of children achieving a good level of development (GLD) by 2028. Inclusive practice to become standard practice. Increasing the frequency and quality of Ofsted inspections and incentivising the

placement of early years teachers in settings (particularly in disadvantaged areas). Doubling the number of Stronger Practice Hubs.

Family services: growing the number of Best Start Family Hubs to up to 1,000, building on proven early identification and intervention approaches.

What should you do?

Business management

A key objective for most of us is managing the business and operational changes and challenges promoted by the expansion of the early years entitlements. We all want to deliver this well for families while ensuring the sustainability of our settings and workforce. It will be fascinating to see how the new entitlement influences and affects parental employment choices and behaviours, and how in turn this will drive and shape demand for childcare and how it is delivered and by whom. This is most definitely something to manage and monitor throughout the whole year.

Local support and strategy

How local authorities' and regional mayoral authorities' roles evolve and develop will be interesting. What tools and powers will they have to help create, manage, and support the market across all types of provision, including harnessing the collective power across local authority boundaries? This has the potential to revolutionise the relationship between providers and local councils and combine resources for greater effectiveness.

Funding changes

Few people don't want changes to the way early years and childcare are funded by government via local authorities, whether that be providers, local

£1.5b
*New funding for
family services and
early education*

SOURCE: DFE



NURSERY MANAGEMENT

councils, or indeed families. Changes must aim to simplify an overly complicated system but also provide greater equity across all families, both disadvantaged and working. This will not happen quickly, and it seems it could take the whole year before proposals are formed. The action here is to consider various scenarios and their effect on business models as they're discussed in the process so we are prepared for the eventual outcome.

Inclusive settings

The ambition is to ensure inclusion becomes standard practice everywhere through more support, training, and a streamlined and effective funding system. This has the aim of doing more to achieve early identification and swift intervention that reduces the need for later services. Is it time for an inclusion review in your setting? Not only should

you expect more frequent inspection visits in the future, but also that SEND and inclusion will receive a higher priority focus from inspectors.

Family services

With a return to many of the previous Sure Start working principles and the creation of Best Start Family Hubs in every local authority area, there will be opportunities to communicate, connect and collaborate. Stronger Practice Hubs will be more widespread, and

this offers extended continuous professional development opportunities, networking, and quality improvement support for many more settings. If you aren't connected already, make sure you are in the future.

For more information, visit coramhempalls.org.uk

1,000
Planned
number of Best Start Family Hubs

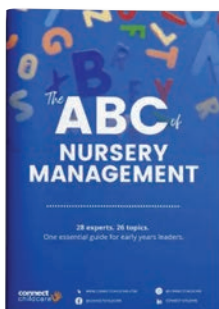
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CPD BOOKSHELF

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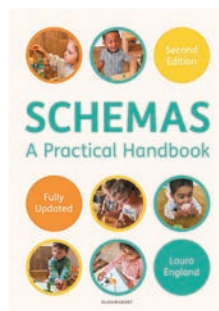
The ABC of Nursery Management
(Connect Childcare, free)



It's free and crammed with practical advice from 28 contributors with deep and broad experience of the early years sector, so it's hard to think of a reason why any EY professional wouldn't want to get hold of the latest edition of Connect Childcare's *The ABC of Nursery Management*. Simply visit the website, add your details, and this inspiring guide will be delivered straight to your inbox.

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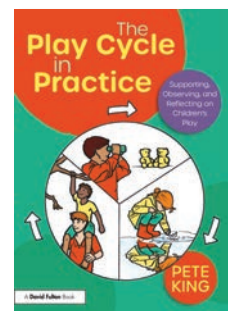
Schemas: A Practical Handbook
(Laura England, £22)



Accessible and fully updated in light of changes to the Early Years framework and the latest research, this title explains the kinds of schemas (repetitive patterns of behaviour that children use to explore and learn about the world) you might come across in your setting and, crucially, how they can be harnessed to unlock learning with the help of simple, low-cost resources.

Visit bloomsbury.com

The Play Cycle in Practice: Supporting, Observing, and Reflecting on Children's Play (Pete King, £18.99)



This well-organised book looks at how understanding the six elements of the Play Cycle can help support practitioners with their interactions and interventions. The inclusion of vignettes and reflections brings the theory – revised and updated based on the author's research – to life, ensuring a read that is as fascinating as it is practical, no matter how much you already know about the power of play.

Visit routledge.com

Say bye to your bikes!

*Whizzing round on two or three wheels might be an early years staple, but it's an activity that should be consigned to history, says the **Secret Practitioner**...*

Here's a question for you: does your setting have, as part of its outdoor learning provision, a selection of bikes and trikes? If the answer is yes, then here's another: why is that?

In the 1980s and 1990s, with the boom in the educational resources sector and the introduction of many an equipment catalogue, came a perceived "checklist" of what was considered best practice for outdoor learning provision. As a result, hardly a Reception class, nursery or preschool lacked a shed full of shiny two- and three-wheelers.

Fast forward to today, and I would say that both our understanding of early child development and respect for the benefits of outdoor learning have changed the landscape of early years beyond recognition. Indoor provision now embraces natural and natural resources and loose parts. Gone are the days of worksheets and laminated plastic play pieces in favour of the authentic and the everyday to reflect a home-from-home experience. So why has this passion for play and our refocusing on the real and relevant not extended as far as many outdoor environments?

The physical development requirements in the EYFS highlight the many skills expected of our young children in their time with us. Surely it's these we should be focusing on? What physical skills exactly do bikes and trikes offer that cannot also be accessed in many different ways in a well-planned outdoor provision? Do they offer children an opportunity to practise going up and down steps? Do they really build balance or scaffold the strength, coordination and control in muscles needed for later writing and self-care skills? Or do they predominantly enable a limited few to increase their heart rate for a few moments? "Children learn to share and to take turns," I hear you chorus. But actually, don't these high-status items

just trigger frustration in children too young to be expected to wait for their turn?

I get that if you laminate a numeral and fix it to the front of a bike, you can say you are offering maths. But surely adding pinecones, sticks, shells, and wood slices to your mud kitchen and sand play will provide more opportunities to develop maths skills outdoors? Certainly, introducing a range of teapots, jugs and spoons in a variety of sizes and materials will lend maths and science learning potential to environments beyond exploring the shape of the bikes' wheels.

You may argue that some children never get the chance to ride a bike elsewhere because of where they live or their families' finances. But isn't it more important for these children to have access to green spaces and to learn to love all things natural than it is to whizz around on tarmac for five

My argument is that bikes and trikes are a relic of a time long gone in early years and, by their very use, limit the learning potential of our outdoor areas. There are better ways to make use of our limited space. So, I suggest considering rehoming these red perils of the playground and freeing up essential, sought-after storage space – you might even raise some much-needed funds to spend on resources that complement the rest of your child-led learning environments.

After all, are bikes and trikes really the rich learning experience their price tag suggests, or do they just encourage conflict and remind you, the practitioner, why we don't wear open-toed sandals to work? I'll let you decide.

Bikes and trikes limit the learning potential of our outdoor areas

minutes if they are lucky? With more and more children showing signs of "biophobia" (a fear of all things biological), the focus for outdoor play and learning *must* be on building spaces that invite nature in and allow children to interact with the living world.

Ask yourself whether bikes have the language potential offered by an amazing fairy garden or a reference book to identify a bug found under a log. Where is the writing potential of a trike in comparison to a potion station or a sandpit full of pirate treasure?



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