



Department  
for Education

# **Study of Early Education and Development: Good Practice in Early Education**

**Research report**

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This study explores how good quality early years settings articulate, establish and sustain good practice that has the potential to improve child outcomes. Focusing on provision for two to four-year-olds it examines good practice in relation to curriculum planning, assessment and monitoring, staffing, managing transitions and communication with parents and home learning.

## Methodology

Sixteen case studies were carried out across England with a range of early years settings assessed as having 'good' or 'excellent' quality provision by 4Children as part of the wider SEED project. The instruments used to gather information on process quality were the revised Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-R), the revised Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-R) and its curricular extension ECERS-E and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing scale (SSTEW). Further detail on the quality assessments instruments used can be found in Appendix A.

Case study settings included maintained nursery classes, as well as a range of private and voluntary settings including day nurseries and pre-schools from across England. Case studies involved face-to-face interviews with setting managers and staff and telephone interviews with parents and Local Authority staff. In total, forty-eight interviews were carried out with setting staff; forty-nine interviews with parents and six with Local Authority staff. Fieldwork was carried out between November 2015 and March 2016.

## Summary of findings

### Learning and development

Case study settings identified a range of features of good practice in relation to learning and development.

### Curriculum planning

Good practice in relation to curriculum planning included approaches that were:

- Tailored to individual needs;
- Capitalised on children's interests in order to achieve learning outcomes;
- Flexible and responsive so that plans could be changed or adapted to follow the interests of the children and / or respond to external events;
- Informed by on-going assessment;
- Grounded in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework; and
- Differentiated for age and stage of development.

Staff at early years settings also thought that curriculum planning was strengthened by consultation and input from staff at all levels and regular evaluation through observation and staff discussion. Finally, settings stressed the importance of communicating planning effectively so that staff understood the aims and objectives and were clear on their roles.

### **Assessment, monitoring and tracking progress**

Assessment and progress tracking were believed to be only valuable if used effectively to support learning and development, identify children requiring additional support, and feed into curriculum planning. Features of good practice felt to support this included:

- Regular communication between staff to raise awareness of issues identified through assessment;
- High staff /child ratios that gave staff sufficient time to carry out regular observations and;
- Effective use of digital assessment tools that supported practitioner judgements and facilitated timely analysis of data.

Effective assessment and progress tracking could be undermined by inconsistent practice which failed to truly reflect a child's stage of development or how far they had progressed. Employing trained staff with a good understanding of child development; carrying out regular audits and quality checks on assessments; and moderating judgements were viewed as features of good practice to tackle this issue. Providing sufficient time for staff to carry out effective assessment was also viewed as critical.

### **Views on what works in supporting children's learning and development**

Setting staff placed the personal, social and emotional development of their children at the heart of their practice. Strategies identified as effective in supporting this development included staff modelling prosocial behaviour; small group activities that supported children to work together, share and take turns; a consistent approach to behaviour management and using snacks and mealtimes as an opportunity to foster prosocial behaviour.

Fostering happy and confident children was a primary goal. Warm and positive relationships between staff and children; consistency and routine; and strong relationships with parents were all viewed as features of good practice that supported wellbeing. Encouraging children to do things for themselves; involving them in decision making and supporting them to find their own solutions to conflicts were elements of good practice felt to encourage self-regulation and independence.

To support early language development and communication, settings prioritised creating a 'language rich' environment through the use of songs, nursery rhymes, stories and providing time for adult/child and peer to peer interaction. High quality adult/child interactions were viewed as essential, as was encouraging home learning and the quality of parent/child interactions through activities and reading at home.

To support cognitive development and instil a lifelong love of learning, strategies included taking a child-led approach, ensuring access to a wide range of resources that were age

appropriate; using visual aids to support learning; and providing an environment with age appropriate furniture and equipment. Staff with the professional knowledge and skill to support this learning underpinned this good practice.

### **Supporting transition**

Features of good practice thought by staff and parents to support transitions into settings included carrying out home visits; gathering information from parents about the child; and working in partnership with other settings to gather relevant information and support the child with the transition. Setting visits; gradually increasing the time children attended; matching activities to children's interests; and providing consistency and routine were strategies felt to help children to settle. Setting staff also felt they had a role to play in supporting parents with the transition and that it was important to be proactive in keeping parents informed about how the child was settling in.

In settings which catered for children from babies to pre-school, strategies had been put in place to facilitate smooth transitions within settings. Gradually introducing the child to the new room, and taking a flexible approach to the allocation of a new key person (changing this if the child bonded with a particular member of staff) were thought to be features of good practice. Underpinning this was the view that transition should be carried out at the child's pace and that it was important to build in flexibility to any arrangement. Consulting parents, keeping them informed of the process and sharing information effectively between staff through transition meetings were also important features.

Good practice in relation to supporting transitions to school included effective information sharing with schools through transition reports, school visits to settings, and consulting parents on the information that was being shared. Taking children to visit their new school, and building on-going relationships with local schools were features of good practice that were felt to help children make the transition smoothly. Setting staff also described putting in place activities to prepare children for the move, such as activities to encourage greater independence.

## **Management and leadership**

### **Leadership**

Effective leadership was felt to be essential to good practice in early years. Managers and staff reflected that effective leaders in early years were those that had a clear vision for the setting; valued and fostered team working; had good professional knowledge; engaged effectively with the wider early years sector; sought continuous improvement; fostered good relationships with parents; had strong organisational skills and delegated effectively; prioritised staff continuing professional development (CPD) and embedded clear systems and processes.

### **Communication**

Communication between staff was viewed as important because it underpinned many other aspects of good practice including curriculum planning, assessment and monitoring, and effective relationships with parents. Staff valued formal channels for

information sharing including regular staff meetings, but also stressed the value of regular informal communication. Staff Facebook pages, information boards and informal catch-ups were all valued as ways in which staff could keep each other informed. Open plan environments were particularly highlighted as a feature that helped this informal communication.

### **Evaluation**

Ongoing evaluation of setting practice was considered a hallmark of good practice because it ensured practice was constantly being reviewed and refined. Observations of setting practice by both senior managers and 'peer to peer' were seen as an effective evaluation tool, both to assess how well activities were meeting the needs of children, and to evaluate staff practice. Audits of children's progress records and the setting environment were also used, as were internal self-evaluation reflection sheets and internal inspections.

### **Partnership working and sources of advice**

To support good practice, settings sought to work in partnership and access advice and guidance from a range of sources. Local Authorities were felt to play an important role in this by co-ordinating early years clusters; running conferences; delivering training and providing packages of support to settings that were judged by Ofsted as inadequate or requiring improvement, as well as offering advice and guidance on SEND and safeguarding. Ofsted were also identified as a source of support as were specialist services including speech and language therapists, psychologists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists.

Some Local Authority and setting staff reflected that reductions in funding to Local Authorities had led to cuts in the services they were able to offer and consequently partnership working between settings was becoming increasingly important. Good practice included visits and information sharing with other settings, and working in partnership with Children's Centres including sharing facilities, and seeking advice and guidance from their early years specialist teachers.

## **Staff recruitment, retention and development**

### **Recruitment of staff**

High quality staff were viewed as the foundation for good practice, but recruitment was viewed as challenging largely because pay levels across the sector were felt to be low. When recruiting staff, settings looked for a range of qualities including a good understanding of child development and the EYFS; high quality interactions with children; enthusiasm for early education; and an ability to communicate with and engage parents effectively.

Case study staff recognised the importance of qualifications. In settings that employed a qualified teacher, staff felt this added an additional focus on teaching and learning and improved the quality of curriculum planning and assessment. Experience was also highly valued, and careful consideration was given to the mix of staff within settings to ensure that less experienced staff were supported by more experienced colleagues. Soft skills

including warmth, empathy, an enjoyment of working with children and good communication skills were also qualities settings looked for.

Some case study settings chose to operate at staff/child ratios higher than statutory requirements because they felt this increased the quality of their provision by giving staff more time to spend with each child. In other case study settings, it was financially unviable to operate at ratios higher than statutory requirements.

### **Staff retention**

Because settings valued staff experience and recruitment was felt to be challenging, staff retention was a priority. Features of good practice that supported staff retention included good communication and team work; strong leadership; flexible working practices; strategies that made staff feel valued (e.g. social events and discounted fees for their own children to attend the setting). Opportunities for career progress were also seen as important for staff retention, but opportunities for this were more limited in small settings.

### **Continuing professional development (CPD)**

High quality settings prioritised on-going CPD to develop professional practice; to keep up-to-date with new research on effective practice; to build networks and share good practice and to support staff retention. Settings identified a number of challenges affecting CPD. These included cuts in Local Authority funding that had reduced the availability of external training; pressures on their own budgets that made it difficult to release staff for training because of cover costs; and limited time available to attend training.

Internal training delivered by senior practitioners was viewed as a cost effective approach to CPD, and setting staff also reflected on the value of learning through experience and observing colleagues. Peer-to-peer observations and regular observations by senior staff were highlighted as particularly effective approaches to supporting staff development. To maximise the cost effectiveness of attending external training, settings put in place strategies to disseminate learning from courses to all staff through staff meetings. On-line training courses were also viewed as a cost effective and easily accessible format for training, particularly for larger providers and nursery chains with large staff bodies. There were also examples of settings supporting staff to work towards qualifications and some worked closely with local colleges to support apprentices through their Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications.

## **Engaging with parents and home learning**

### **How parents define high quality provision**

Parents judged the quality of early years settings by taking into consideration a range of factors:

- Their 'word-of-mouth' reputation (e.g. how well friends' and relatives' children 'got on' at the setting; feedback on the staff; and the extent of waiting lists).
- Staff/child interactions (particularly the warmth of the interactions between staff and their child during setting visits and open days).

- Although not a consideration for all, some parents actively chose settings on the basis that the staff/child ratios were high and they felt this would ensure their child got the individual attention they needed.
- Parents felt reassured if their setting had good staff retention because this was felt to be an indicator of a happy workforce and because stable staff provided continuity of care.
- Mixed views were held by parents on the qualifications staff should have. For some, staff qualifications were taken into consideration when choosing a setting. For others, it was assumed that all staff would be relevantly qualified and so this was not something they enquired about. For another group of parents, experience of working with children and the quality of the staff/child interactions were prioritised over qualification levels.
- Parents also took into consideration the facilities and equipment, looking for adequate space inside and outside; availability of a good range of activities; and age-appropriate equipment.
- Safety was also an important consideration, and 'word of mouth' reputation for safety was taken into account. Parents sought evidence of good security and safety procedures during setting visits and open days.

In addition to quality considerations, location and cost were also factored into decisions when choosing a setting for their child.

### **Communicating with parents**

To support effective communication with parents, setting staff highlighted the importance of being non-judgemental and building trust; getting to know parents individually and tailoring the mode of communication to their preferences; and ensuring effective communication between staff so that *all* staff were able to answer parent queries.

Email, online and text message communication was generally viewed positively by parents as a useful means of communication, although some preferred paper-based methods and some raised concerns about the privacy of social media platforms. Notice boards were well received by parents, as were written feedback diaries.

To further engage with parents, settings used a range of approaches including encouraging two-way communication through parent feedback books; and providing opportunities for parents to volunteer at the setting.

To keep parents informed of the progress of their child, settings held parents' evenings and kept progress records which were shared with parents. In some instances, settings were using online assessment and monitoring systems that could be shared with parents. Parents who reflected positively on these approaches valued the immediacy of the feedback and the ease of access, although some were less positive, preferring face-to-face feedback to discuss the progress of their child.

## **Supporting home learning**

Settings took a proactive approach towards supporting home learning to ensure a consistent approach between home and the setting; to encourage high quality parent/child interactions; to foster learning for pleasure and (in the case of older children) to prepare them for school.

Settings used a range of strategies including:

- Offering personalised advice and guidance to parents on an ad hoc basis e.g. toilet training; healthy eating; pencil grip etc.
- Making suggestions through newsletters and emails for ways in which parents could incorporate learning into everyday life e.g. counting the trees on the way home.
- Providing activity sheets that children completed with their parents, which focused on key areas of learning e.g. phonics, numbers etc.
- Inviting parents into the setting to observe classes e.g. sessions on phonics, to support their use of the techniques at home.
- Encouraging reading at home by regularly lending books.

Features of good practice felt to underpin effective support for home learning included giving careful consideration to the frequency of home learning suggestions so that parents found it manageable; establishing good relationships with parents before making suggestions for home learning; presenting home learning suggestions to parents in a way that did not pressurise or judge them; and giving children an element of choice and control over the activities to increase their engagement.

## **Conclusion**

In identifying features of good practice in early education, three broad cross-cutting themes emerged:

- **Tailoring practice to the needs of the children**

Underpinning good practice was an ethos that placed the child at the centre of setting practice. Systems and processes were developed with the wellbeing and development of the children in mind and this helped settings maintain focus and avoid distractions that might detract from this focus. In practice, this meant settings had a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve for the children in their care, and these clear goals informed all areas of their practice.

- **Skilled and experienced staff**

A second cross-cutting theme was the importance of staff that were qualified, knowledgeable and experienced because it was this skilled workforce that underpinned the practices that supported children to reach their full potential. Given the importance of a skilled workforce, settings with good practice worked hard to recruit and retain high quality staff, and prioritised ongoing support for their

staff's development. Strong leadership was also considered vital, and good practice was underpinned by leaders who led by example; fostered team work and had a clear vision of what they were aiming to achieve.

- **An open and reflective culture**

The final theme running throughout this examination of good practice was the importance of an open and reflective culture, as this was thought to drive continuous improvement; create a positive working environment and encourage sharing of good practice to increase the quality of the early years sector as a whole. In practice this meant that settings with good practice sought out and worked in partnership with other settings and professionals; recognised the knowledge and expertise of their own staff and valued open discussion and staff consultation; and embedded a culture of self-evaluation as a means of driving continuous improvement.

### **Next steps**

Future reports from the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) will examine the impacts of early education on child outcomes, including: The first impact analysis report from the SEED survey of families will report on the impact of early education on child outcomes at age three; and a report outlining findings from quality assessments carried out across one thousand early years settings, examining the quality of early years provision and factors associated with higher or lower quality.

# 1. Introduction

## Research Aims

The aim of this study was to explore how good and excellent quality early years settings articulate, establish and sustain practices that have the potential to improve child outcomes. In particular the study aimed to explore from the perspective of setting staff and parents:

- How early years settings articulate and sustain high quality teaching and learning;
- The features of leadership and management that contribute to high quality provision;
- The role staffing and issues related to recruitment, retention and work force development have on good practice;
- How effective relationships are maintained with parents;
- How providers support home learning.

## Background to the study

### Policy background

The UK Government spends substantial amounts of public funds on funding early years provision (House of Lords, 2015). At present, all three- and four-year-olds in England are entitled to funded early childhood education and care, for 570 hours per year (equivalent to 15 hours per week, for 38 weeks of the year). More recently the Government has expanded this entitlement to benefit two-year-old children living in lower income households in England. From September 2013, two-year-old children living in the 20 per cent most disadvantaged households in England became eligible for 15 hours of funded early education per week. This was extended in September 2014, so that two-year-old children in the 40 per cent most disadvantaged households in England were eligible for 15 hours of funded provision. Funded places are available in private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings, childminders, maintained nursery schools and nursery classes. In accordance with the Childcare Act 2016, from September 2017, all working families with three- and four-year-olds who meet certain earnings criteria will be able to receive an additional 15 hours of free childcare, which means that in total across the existing universal provision and the new provision for working families they will be entitled to 30 hours of free childcare per week for 38 weeks of the year (equivalent to 1140 hours of free childcare per year).

The take-up of the funded provision is high. The most recent official statistics show that 94% of three-year-olds and 99% of four-year-olds were taking up some government funded early education, and among the eligible two-year-olds, 58% were receiving the free provision (DfE, 2015). There are, however, some concerns about insufficient availability of funded places in some local authorities (Rutter, 2016) and about lower levels of take-up of the funded provision among families in more disadvantaged circumstances (Huskinson et al., 2016; Speight et al., 2010).

In addition to the funded provision for two-, three- and four-year-olds, support for families with childcare costs is available through tax credits and employer-provided childcare vouchers, which are tax exempt up to a certain limit (HM Government, 2013), with plans to extend this support further (HM Treasury, 2014). For example, under the new Universal Credit, working parents will be able to claim back up to 85% of their paid out childcare costs (DWP, 2013). In addition, the new Tax-Free-Childcare scheme which will be rolled out in 2017 and will gradually replace the employer-provided childcare vouchers, will offer working parents who meet certain earnings criteria 20% support towards qualifying childcare costs up to a value of £2,000 per child per year. The Government also supports the early years sector more directly, for example, through the Early Years Pupil Premium funding, which follows the child and is paid to settings attended by the identified children from lower income families (DfE, 2014a).

Availability, affordability and quality of early years provision have been the focus of policy making in England since the introduction of the National Childcare Strategy in 1998. In relation to quality of the provision, which is the focus of this report, the Government's policy paper *More Great Childcare* states:

*'...High quality early education and childcare, delivered with love and care, can have a powerful impact on young children. The evidence is clear that a good start in these early years can have a positive effect on children's development, preparing them for school and later life.'*  
(DfE, 2013: 13)

The requirements to early years settings and schools are set out in the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS), which covers children from birth to age five (Department for Education, 2014b) and has legal foundations in the Childcare Act 2006. These requirements cover seven key areas of learning and development. Three of these areas are the prime areas, as they are particularly crucial for children's capacity to learn, form relationships and thrive. These are:

- communication and language;
- physical development; and
- personal, social and emotional development.

Providers must also support children in four specific areas, through which the three prime areas are strengthened and applied. These are:

- literacy;
- mathematics;
- understanding the world; and
- expressive arts and design.

One of the stated aims of the framework is 'to provide quality and consistency in all early years settings, so that every child makes good progress and no child gets left behind' (DfE, 2014b: 5).

The Government monitors the extent to which early years providers satisfy the requirements of the EYFS through inspections carried out by Ofsted using the Common Inspection Framework (since September 2015). Ofsted inspectors assess and grade early years providers using the following four scales, which are then combined into an overall effectiveness grade (Ofsted, 2015a):

- Effectiveness of the leadership and management
- Quality of teaching, learning and assessment
- Personal development, behaviour and welfare
- Outcomes for children.

No setting can achieve an overall outstanding effectiveness grade unless their grade for the quality of teaching and learning is outstanding.

The Government uses Ofsted ratings to monitor quality of providers offering the government funded hours of early education and care for eligible two-, three- and four-year-olds. The most recent figures show that 85% of eligible children received their funded provision in settings rated good or outstanding by Ofsted (Department for Education, 2015b).

The role of Ofsted in supporting good practice in early years through their inspections is of key importance. This regulatory system has been criticised for its limitations, as it is based around infrequent inspections and limited capacity for detailed feedback and support for the settings, as well as not capturing all aspects of the quality of the provision (Mathers et al., 2012). However, this was before the introduction of the Common Inspection Framework in September 2015.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Common Inspection Framework, see Ofsted (2015a).

## Overview of SEED

The Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) is a major study exploring early years provision and how it may improve outcomes for children and their families. It is undertaken by NatCen Social Research, the University of Oxford, 4Children and Frontier Economics, and it follows around 6,000 children across England from the age of two, through their first few years of early education.

The aims of SEED are to:

- Provide evidence of the impact of current early years provision on children's outcomes;
- Provide a basis for longitudinal assessment of the impact of early years provision on later attainment;
- Inform policy development to improve children's readiness for school;
- Assess the role and influence of the quality of early education provision on children's outcomes;
- Assess the overall value for money of early education in England and the relative value for money associated with different types (e.g. private, voluntary, maintained) and quality of provision;
- Explore how parenting and the home learning environment interacts with early years education in affecting children's outcomes.

To address these aims, SEED has several inter-related research components:

- A longitudinal survey of families with pre-school children
- Studies of early years settings and of childminder provision (quality, characteristics and process)
- Case studies of good practice in early years settings
- A value for money study
- Qualitative studies of childminders and of early education provision for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

The present report is based on the case studies of good practice in early years settings.

## Previous research on quality in early years provision

There has been a substantial amount of research on the quality of early years provision and the potential benefits of attending a high quality provider for child development. A number of studies have shown that accessing early childhood education and care, in good quality provision in particular, can have a positive effect on the educational, cognitive, behavioural and social outcomes of children, both in the short and long term (e.g. Barnes and Melhuish, 2016; Lloyd and Potter, 2014; Melhuish, 2004; Smith et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004; Sylva et al., 2010). Some evidence suggests that the positive impact is greatest on children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (Hall et al., 2013; Maisey et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2004). This suggests that early childhood education and care has the potential to make a key contribution to narrowing the gap in development between groups of children. Attending high quality early years education helps prepare young children to be 'school ready' and more able to take forward their learning when they start school (Becker, 2011), an important foundation for a successful educational experience improving their long-term life outcomes.

Studies of early years provision have focused on measuring the quality of provision directly by observing practice, and on identifying which characteristics of the settings' systems, structures and environments tend to be linked with higher quality. Staff and managers' qualifications have been found to be strongly associated with the quality of early years provision (Karemaker et al., 2011; Mathers et al., 2007; Mathers and Smees, 2014; Roberts et al., 2010). Under recent English Governments, there has been support to improve qualification levels (e.g. the Graduate Leader Fund). There is some evidence suggesting that the level of qualifications in the early years sector has indeed gone up. Simon et al. (2016) analysed time trend data from the Labour Force Survey and reported that in 2012-14, 73 per cent of British childcare workers had National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level 3 or higher, which constituted a 12 per cent increase since 2005. The Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey 2013 reported an even greater increase in the proportion of staff with qualifications at level 3 or above: for full day care settings, from 75% in 2008 to 87% in 2013, and for sessional care settings, from 61% in 2008 to 84% in 2013 (Brind et al., 2014). If we use qualifications of staff as a proxy for the quality of provision, these figures indicate that the quality is likely to have been gradually improving. This is also recognised by Ofsted who have year on year reported an increase in the quality of early years provision with the 2015 figures citing 85% of early years providers as good or outstanding (Ofsted, 2015b).

Another characteristic found to be associated with better quality provision is higher staff-child ratios (Mathers et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2010). For example, Karemaker et al. (2011) found that for children aged 30 months to 5 years, lower staff-child ratios (i.e. the more children per staff member) were associated with lower quality of interactions, and for children aged from birth to 30 months, lower staff-child ratios were associated with lower quality care routines.

Type of setting was also found to be associated with quality of provision in previous research. For example, Roberts et al. (2010) found that in the Millennium Cohort Study, quality was higher in maintained settings and in settings which had children's centre status. An older piece of research based on the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project also found that quality was higher in maintained settings (Sylva et al., 1999). Furthermore, while quality of provision in the maintained sector tends to be similar across areas with different degrees of deprivation, this is not always the case within the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector. Mathers and Smees (2014) found that quality of PVI provision for three- and four-year-olds was lower in settings located in deprived areas. This was more evident in relation to the quality of interactions, support for learning, language and literacy, and provision for diversity and individual needs.

Karemaker *et al.* (2011) found that staff length of service was associated with higher quality of provision for younger children (from birth to 30 months) in relation to listening and talking.

Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2003) undertook intensive case studies of practice across the Foundation Stage as part of the EPPE project, which used documentary analysis, interviews and observations. Their report found that good outcomes for children were linked with staff viewing cognitive and social development of children as complementary, strong leadership at the setting, adult-child interactions that extended children's thinking, practitioners having good understanding of how young children learn, and strong parental involvement.

## Methodology

This section sets out the research study methodology.

### Sampling and recruitment

Sixteen case study early years settings were selected from a sample frame of settings who were assessed as having 'good' or 'excellent' quality provision as part of the wider quality assessment element of the SEED project. The instruments used to gather information on process quality were the revised Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-R), the revised Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-R) and its curricular extension ECERS-E and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing scale (SSTEW). Further detail on the sampling approach and the quality assessment instruments used, as well as an overview of the achieved case study sample can be found in Appendix A.

Case study settings included nursery classes, private and voluntary settings located across different regions of England. Within each case study, interviews were carried out

with the setting manager<sup>2</sup> and typically between two and five members of their staff (depending on provider size and the availability of staff). Parents whose children attended the case study providers were invited to participate in telephone interviews to feedback their views and experiences of using the case study setting. In total, forty-eight interviews were carried out with setting staff across the sixteen case studies, and forty-nine telephone interviews were carried out with parents

In addition, six telephone interviews were carried out with Local Authority staff responsible for supporting the early years sector in their area. These were sampled from Local Authorities in which case study settings were located.

A breakdown of the number of interviews achieved in each case study and a full discussion of the recruitment of case study settings, parents and Local Authority officers can be found in Appendix A.

## **Fieldwork**

Fieldwork took place between November 2015 and March 2016. Interviews with early years setting staff typically lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour and were carried out face to face. Interviews with parents were conducted by telephone as this flexible data collection method meant interviews could be arranged at times most convenient for parents or rearranged at short notice. Interviews with parents lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Interviews with Local Authority staff were conducted by telephone and typically lasted 45 minutes.

Further detail on the approach to fieldwork and analysis can be found in Appendix A. Copies of the topic guides used to guide interviews can be found in Appendix B.

## **Report coverage**

The remaining chapters present the findings from the study, as follows:

Chapter 2: Learning and development

Chapter 3: Management and leadership

Chapter 4: Staff recruitment, retention and development

Chapter 5: Engaging with parents and home learning

Chapter 6: Conclusion

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'setting manager' is used throughout this report to refer to the staff member responsible for day-to-day management and oversight of the setting. In nursery classes this was typically the early years teacher.

## 2. Learning and development

### Key findings

Good practice in relation to **curriculum planning** included approaches that:

- Were grounded in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework but tailored to individual needs;
- Capitalised on children's interests in order to achieve learning outcomes;
- Were informed by on-going assessment
- Involved effective staff communication at all levels and regular evaluation through observation and staff discussion.

**Effective assessment and progress tracking** were supported by:

- Regular communication between staff;
- High staff /child ratios;
- Effective use of digital assessment tools;
- Employing trained staff with a good understanding of child development;
- Carrying out regular audits on assessments;
- Providing sufficient time for staff to carry out effective assessment.

Strategies identified as effective in supporting **children's development** included:

- Creating a 'language rich' environment and using appropriate visual aids;
- High quality adult/child interactions;
- Encouraging home learning and strong relationships with parents;
- Warm and positive relationships between staff and children;
- Small group activities that supported children to work together, share and take turns;
- A consistent approach to behaviour management;
- Encouraging children to do things for themselves; involving them in decision making and supporting them to find their own solutions to conflicts were elements of good practice felt to encourage self-regulation and independence.
- Employing staff with the professional knowledge and skill to support learning.

Features of good practice thought by staff and parents to **support transitions** included:

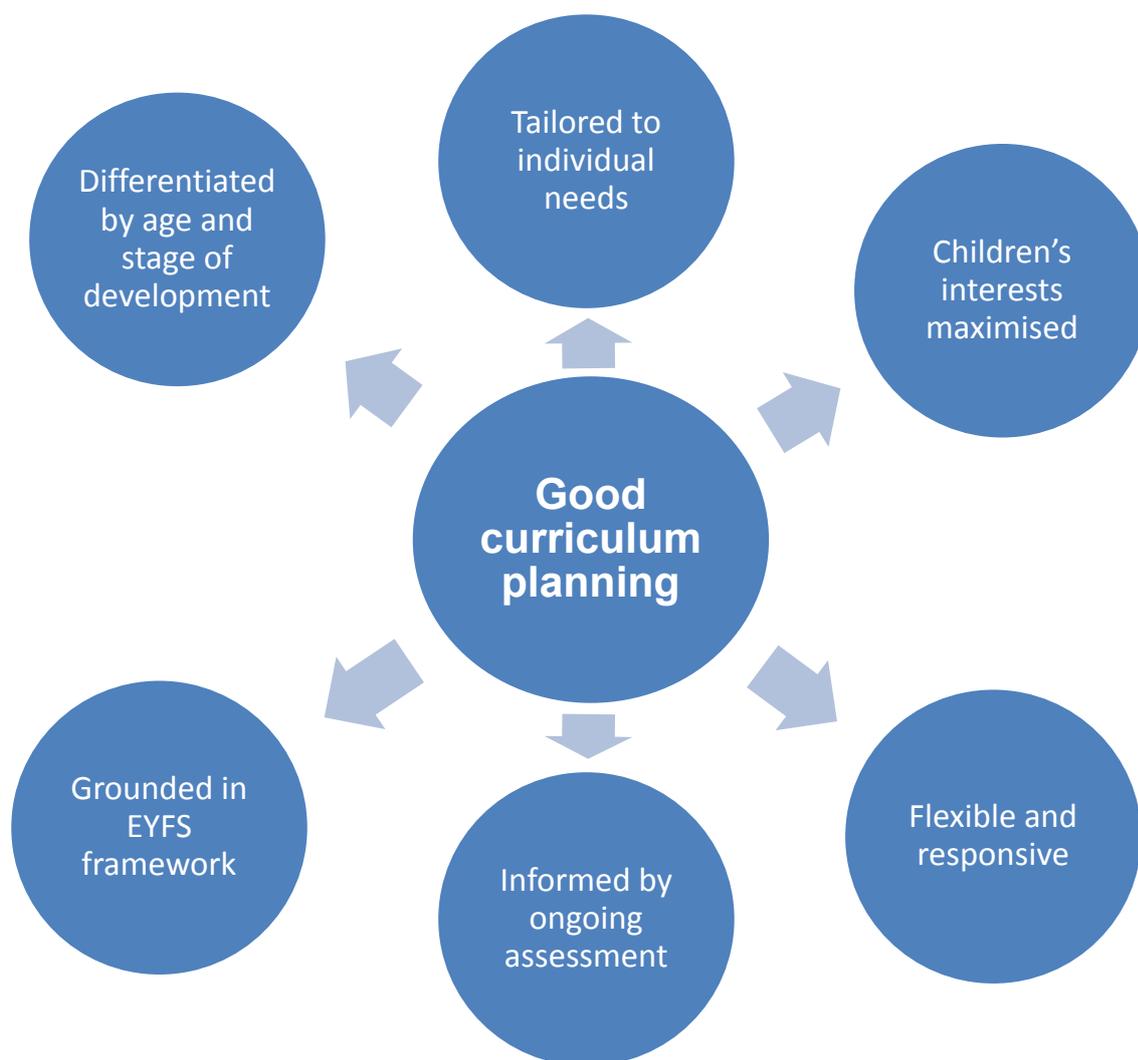
- Home visits and school visits;
- Effective information sharing between staff;
- Working in partnership with other settings and schools;
- Supporting the child to settle by encouraging setting visits;
- Effective communication and consultation with parents.

This chapter reports on good practice in relation to learning and development. It looks at approaches to curriculum planning, assessment and tracking, and views on effective approaches to learning and development.

## Curriculum planning

Case study settings were diverse in terms of their size, the age ranges they catered for, and the hours they offered. Consequently, approaches to curriculum planning<sup>3</sup> were also diverse. However, within this diverse practice settings identified a number of features of good practice in curriculum planning.

**Figure 2.1 Features of good curriculum planning**



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<sup>3</sup> The term 'curriculum planning' is used throughout this report to refer to how settings planned their curriculum across the seven areas of learning and development set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage framework.

## Tailored to individual needs

Setting staff reflected on the critical importance of curriculum planning being tailored to the individual needs of children for three reasons:

1. By tailoring the curriculum to the interests of each individual child, children were more focused, purposeful and engaged in activities and this, in turn, enhanced their learning.
2. The curriculum could be tailored to each child's individual needs, ensuring that the curriculum met these needs and supported their development appropriately.
3. Children have different ways of learning and consequently curriculum planning needs to accommodate these differences to be effective.

In practice, this individualised planning was underpinned by:

- In-depth knowledge of each individual child

Staff emphasised the importance of getting to know each child really well by spending time with them, conducting observations, supporting and enhancing their play and creating a bond of trust:

*'I think the most important thing [for planning] is getting to know your key children and having that bond with them and getting to know what they like, what they don't like, and having that relationship with the parents as well, that you can speak to them and say oh, 'we've done this today but so-and-so wasn't really interested.' You know, sometimes parents say 'oh no, they don't really like messy play', so then you've got to think of another way of [reaching] that target, so I think that's the most important thing, is getting to know your children and then you can plan for them.'*

(Setting staff, Private setting, East Midlands)

The 'key person' model (in which each child is assigned a key person to support their learning and liaise with their families) was thought to foster this. However, staff also stressed the importance of all staff sharing in the responsibility of supporting the learning of each child, reflecting that as children move around a setting and take part in different activities, all staff need to be aware of their interests and needs to ensure these are being met.

Building good relationships with parents and seeking feedback from them on the needs and interests of their child was also viewed as essential. When children joined settings, parents were asked for information on their interests and stage of development and this feedback was incorporated into curriculum planning. This

feedback would continue in informal discussions with parents and would also be revisited at parent evenings to ensure that up to date information was feeding in.

- Capitalising on children's interests to achieve learning outcomes

Staff reflected on the need to find creative ways to achieve learning outcomes by working with the interests of the child and fostering and extending these. The following case examples illustrate different ways this was tackled in planning the curriculum:

### **Case example of using the concept of 'schema' to support curriculum planning**

A nursery catering for two year olds, co-located on a school site with a maintained nursery for three- and four-year-olds, used the concept of 'schema' (patterns of repeatable behaviour which can be observed in young children's play, e.g. scattering schema, trajectory schema) to help staff match curriculum content with children's interests.

*'We found that.. quite a lot of the really young two year olds were.. just here, there and everywhere. And we were struggling to plan because we didn't feel like they were, at the time, doing much.. So then we went back to look at schemas and we've done a lot of work.. developing our understanding on schemas.. what schemas do we think these children are showing.. A lot of our children like the trajectory schema, so we have the guttering for water coming down, cars, balls.. and then that sort of goes nicely into all your scientific [areas] with the sort of you know, levelling it up, what happens if it's flat, if it's high.'* (Setting staff, Private setting, North West)

Staff observed how this approach had given them fresh insight into the activities and behaviours of their two-year-old cohort and helped them to plan effectively to extend and channel these interests.

### **Case example of tailoring curriculum planning to the interests of the child**

In this preschool, staff identified a gap in a group of boys' development around mark making. In response, they found a way to build on their interests to extend their learning:

*'We put our heads together and we thought right - all they do is play with the cars and garage, let's try and sellotape the cars to the pens. So we sellotaped all the cars to the pens, put out a big play mat, took the garage away, put the cars there. We suddenly got these boys mark making, they would draw - and then they visually saw it, you know, and they all then went on to become very interested in mark making and so again, it's taking it from the children's interest and trying to adapt it so that you can get their learning into all the different areas, if you like.'*

(Setting staff, Voluntary setting, South East)

- Flexibility and responsiveness

For curriculum planning to truly meet the needs and interests of individual children staff described the importance of flexibility so that plans could be changed or adapted to follow the interests of the children and /or respond to external events. Staff described having overarching aims and broad plans, but within these there was scope for the adaptation a truly child-led approach required:

*'Learning for early years is very fluid... and you go off on tangents at a moment's notice. So, yes, you do have plans, and you try your best to follow them but you must be prepared to shoot off a little bit because if suddenly a child is talking about a rocket, you don't want to squash that enthusiasm because all the lovely language and learning is there, you just need to go with it sometimes.'*

(Setting manager, Voluntary setting, South East)

In one case study setting, this had led staff to plan adult initiated activities for each key group on a daily basis so that each day's planning built on what the children had done the day before, observing that this increased the engagement of the children and improved the flow of the curriculum:

*Staff 1: 'Well, in the key worker time what we found when we planned.. one day we might be learning about shapes and the next day we might be reading a story completely unrelated. And it just... didn't seem to flow right but now, now we've gone off their interests.. I think they're more willing to learn. We read the story 'Whatever Next!' first and then somebody pointed at the rocket and they were really interested in talking about the rocket. So that's why then we've painted rockets, or like tomorrow we might count rockets or sing some songs about rockets... But you won't know what you're doing because we plan after that key group...what you're going to be doing the next day.'*

*Staff 2: 'So you're not planning too far in advance because they might go off on a tangent; they might decide they like bears instead.'*

(Setting staff, Private setting, North West)

### **Informed by on-going assessment**

Ofsted inspection guidance sets out an expectation that curriculum planning should look towards each child's next stage of development and should be informed by on-going formative observational assessment (Ofsted, 2015a). Setting staff acknowledged the importance of this and described a planning 'cycle' that provided scope for on-going

assessment to feed into curriculum planning at an individual and cohort level<sup>4</sup>. The following case examples illustrate the ways in which settings built this into their planning:

#### **Case example of curriculum planning informed by on-going formative assessment**

In this day nursery, individual staff were responsible for the curriculum planning and

#### **Case example of using online assessment tools to inform curriculum planning**

In this maintained nursery class, an online assessment tool was used to track all children against EYFS learning and development goals. This was updated on a half-termly basis to allow staff to easily track the progress of individual children and also identify strengths and weaknesses in their provision at a cohort level. This data was then used to inform curriculum planning going forward.

#### **Grounded in the EYFS framework**

Settings linked their curriculum planning to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework (DfE, 2014b) to ensure they were meeting its requirements and planning for the seven areas of learning and development outlined in the framework. The following case example illustrates one approach used to achieve this:

#### **Case example of curriculum planning linking to Development Matters.**

In this maintained nursery class, the staff met weekly for an hour long planning meeting during which the interests and needs of the children would be discussed. The nursery teacher used the Development Matters guidance - developed to support the implementation of the EYFS statutory requirements (Early Education, 2012) to plan activities across all the learning and development areas, differentiating between activities defined as 'continuous provision' because they were available every day and 'enhanced' activities that were changed weekly. By structuring planning in this way, a broad curriculum covering all key areas was assured.

Settings also used the characteristics of effective learning as set out in the EYFS statutory framework - *playing and exploring*; *active learning*; and *creating and thinking critically*, to shape their planning and assessment processes.

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<sup>4</sup> This cycle of formative assessment feeding into planning is also articulated in Development Matters – a guidance document that supports the implementation of the Early Years Foundation Stage (Early Education, 2012).

## **Differentiated for age and stage of development**

Settings described the importance of differentiating learning activities for children of different ages and at different levels of development in their planning. For child-led activities, this focused on ensuring that resources and equipment were appropriate for different levels of development and that staff were facilitating that play in an appropriate way that took into consideration different stages of development:

*'So it's having that balance when you think of what you've got out in resources.. for example the dressing up clothes. Have some easier clothes for the children to put on and help, but the older children encourage them to put their own clothes on, encourage them to do their own buttons up and their own zips up. So it's extending their play to that higher level for the older children but making sure that the younger ones don't get frustrated.. So it's keeping it on both levels when you put your resources out.'*

(Setting staff, Voluntary setting, Yorkshire and Humberside)

In adult-led activities, staff simplified or extended activities depending on the individual children participating and knowledge of their current stage of development and their 'next steps'. In some instances, children were grouped for activities by their stage of development to ensure that activities had sufficient challenge. Effective differentiation was felt to be underpinned by strong on-going assessment, and staff with a good knowledge of child development.

## **Communicated effectively to staff**

For curriculum planning to be effective, setting managers stressed the need for clear communication to staff. This was considered vital in two ways. Firstly, in terms of communicating effectively the broader vision and ethos of the setting to staff so that they understood the broader aims their planning was contributing to. Secondly, in terms of day-to-day planning so that staff were clear on their roles, were able to prepare effectively, and clearly understood the children's learning outcomes they were aiming to achieve. Staff meetings were used to disseminate planning, as were 'planning boards' displayed on walls so staff had a visual reference. In other instances, weekly plans were circulated to staff a few days in advance.

## Case example of engaging staff in the vision and ethos of the provider to underpin effective curriculum planning

This private nursery refreshed its approach to curriculum planning after the nursery teacher felt it had become too driven by staff interests and strengths and not sufficiently focused on the interests and needs of the children. Staff training was held and staff worked together to identify and agree on the goals they had for their children. Staff then articulated how their approach to the curriculum and their pedagogic strategies would achieve these goals (which included fostering happy, social, communicative, confident, independent, creative, safe and secure children). These goals were then used to underpin a more child-led approach to curriculum planning going forward.

Keeping parents informed about the learning, themes, topics and activities covered in the curriculum was also felt to be important because it meant parents could support their children at home. In one case study setting for example, the manager emailed parents weekly to inform them of the 'letter of the week' so that they could support their child's learning.

### Developed in consultation with staff

Curriculum planning was at its best when there was active consultation and input from all staff. This was because staff working closely with the children and their families were best placed to identify children's interests. It was also in part because both setting managers and staff felt that a collaborative approach to curriculum planning increased staff engagement and this in turn benefited the children because staff were more motivated and more invested in the activities they were facilitating:

*'As a team member, (and we do have a very good team), we all have our different strengths but we all bring out the best in one another.. if you actually have an input in planning something you've got more enthusiasm and passion to present it.. if you thought actually, 'yeah, that was my idea, they listened to me, they must have thought that was.. something', that builds your self-esteem.. and then how you present an activity to a child makes all the difference.. so that's why I think it's so important.*

(Setting staff, Voluntary setting, South East)

### Evaluated

As part of broader quality improvement and self-evaluation approaches (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4), staff underpinned their curriculum planning by regularly reflecting on their practice, evaluating the activities planned and incorporating this into future planning. Examples of this included one setting where a 'reflective practice book'

was used to regularly record reflections on activities carried out so that staff could see which had worked well. In another instance, a member of staff would be assigned to carry out an evaluation of the day's activities. This would involve observing the activities and seeking feedback from other members of staff. This evaluation would then be taken into consideration alongside children's interests and their 'next steps' to inform future planning.

## **Assessment monitoring and tracking progress**

The EYFS statutory framework recognises assessment as an integral part of learning and development – key to effective practice in supporting children to progress (DfE, 2014b). This section reports on how case study settings approached assessment – the stages of the process, the tools used, and views on effective practice.

### **Stages in the assessment process**

Settings described a 'cycle' of assessment, starting with a baseline assessment when children joined the setting, followed by on-going formative observational assessment that informed curriculum planning, and the 'next steps' for each child:

#### **Baseline assessments**

Settings described establishing an accurate baseline assessment as critical, because all progress was measured from this starting point. To achieve this, children were given a period of time to settle in and build a relationship with their key person, before a baseline assessment was carried out that assessed them against expectations for their age. This was based primarily on observations, but if the child had attended a previous setting, assessment data from this setting would feed into this initial baseline assessment. Settings also incorporated feedback from parents in these initial assessments, drawing on information gathered from home visits, informal discussions and written feedback forms.

## On-going assessment

After a clear baseline had been established, settings described an on-going cycle of assessment, based on regular observations of both child- and adult-initiated activities. The on-going assessment cycle was typically carried out on a termly basis with regular observation and tracking followed by an assessment against EYFS development criteria at the end of a set period which ranged between 4 and 12 weeks. This assessment was then used to feed into next steps and curriculum planning across the setting.

## Assessment tools

Case study settings used a range of tools to support effective assessment:

- Paper based approaches

Paper based assessment tools included observation templates, and tracking sheets that linked to EYFS areas of learning and development. In some instances, these tools were developed by settings themselves, in other cases settings drew on resources supplied by their Local Authority, provider chain or bought commercially.

Assessment data was regularly recorded in progress records, which provided an overview of the development of each child. These would be shared with parents on an on-going basis.

- Digital packages

Increasingly, settings described moving towards online software packages to support assessment, with observations recorded on tablets and uploaded immediately to online platforms. A diverse range of commercial packages were being used, but typical features included the facility to link observations to EYFS areas of learning and development; the ability to interrogate data at the individual and cohort level; and (in some examples) the facility to share data with parents on secure on-line platforms (discussed further in Chapter 5).

These online tools were viewed positively by staff because they made analysis of the data easier (by providing reports on different areas of the curriculum / sub-groups in the cohort). The time required to record assessments was also reduced:

*'It saves us a lot of time. It would be just one of those paper-pushing tasks beforehand, where you'd have to take a photo, and then download it, and then print them out, then cut them out, then glue it in, and then write the Post-It note at the time so you don't forget, make sure you match it up to the right photo and stick it on a piece of paper. So now it's much more instant, and we're doing much higher quality observations, because we*

*know as soon as you take the photo the software enables you to write the Post-It note as you're doing it.'*

(Setting manager, Nursery class, West Midlands)

## Application of assessment data

To avoid assessments becoming a tick-box exercise, settings stressed the importance of using assessments effectively to identify children requiring additional support, support learning and development, engage parents and feed into curriculum planning. It was this effective use of assessment data that was considered an essential feature of good practice.

### Identifying and addressing additional support needs

Settings described how children who were not making sufficient progress would be identified through analysis of assessment data and staff discussion, alongside consultation with parents and other professionals working with the child. Using this range of evidence, additional strategies and interventions were then put in place to support their learning. This support was individualised and varied, but examples from case studies included intervention groups (small groups of children grouped together for intensive support) to address specific needs, 1-2-1 support within the setting, and referral to other specialist services.

For children with the highest levels of need, settings consulted with SENCOs (either within the setting or area based) and developed action plans in consultation with parents. These set out the strategies that would be used to support the individual child (including referrals and support from specialist services e.g. speech and language therapists) and were reviewed and updated every six weeks.

Features of effective assessment practice that were thought to facilitate identification of additional support needs included:

- Regular communication between staff to raise awareness of any issues and concerns and a sense of collective responsibility for the progress and development of all children within the setting. Weekly or fortnightly meetings to discuss any issues, were highlighted as an important element of this effective communication.
- High staff /child ratios that gave staff sufficient time to support the child and to carry out regular observations.
- Use of digital assessment tools that facilitated timely analysis of data, and supported early identification of children not making sufficient progress, but only when these tools were used to effectively to *support* rather than *supersede* practitioner judgment:

*'So, we have a rigorous tracking system.. you literally push a button and it tells you who's working above, who's working below, how many points progress these children have made and the information is now instant. So, that there's no way a child can fall through the net at all because it would be flagged up straight away and then obviously.. the information we have about our children informs what we plan for them'. (Setting manager, Private setting, Yorkshire and Humberside)*

### **Identifying and addressing gaps in provision**

Assessment data was also used to identify areas of setting provision that needed further development. To achieve this, assessment data was examined at a cohort level and weaknesses or areas where there was a pattern of children not making sufficient progress were identified. These areas of the curriculum were then reviewed, with setting managers looking at curriculum planning, resources and staff training needs.

### **Views on how to support effective assessment**

Settings described a number of challenges to effective assessment practice, and identified ways in which they sought to overcome these:

#### **Accuracy and consistency**

For assessment to be useful and effective, settings reflected on the importance of accuracy in the judgements made so that they truly reflected the stage of development of each child and could provide an accurate measure of distance travelled. Inconsistent practice (both across and within settings) was identified as a key challenge by both setting staff and Local Authority early years teams and as an area that needed further development. Settings tackled this issue by:

- Employing trained staff with a good understanding of child development with the knowledge and skills to accurately assess stages of development.
- Senior managers carrying out audits and quality checks on assessments on a regular basis and feeding back issues and concerns to staff.
- Carrying out moderation at a 'hub' or 'cluster' level across settings to improve consistency and accuracy across the sector.

#### **Staff time**

Staff highlighted the challenge of carrying out effective assessment with limited time and the difficult balance to be struck between finding the time needed to carry out and record high quality assessments and spending quality time with the children in their care. Despite these challenges, settings valued effective assessment and sought to overcome these difficulties by:

- Providing dedicated time each week for staff to update and record assessment data.

- Introducing digital packages for assessment which, when used effectively, could reduce the time required to maintain assessment records, freeing up staff to spend more time with the children.

## Views on what works in supporting children’s learning and development

Setting staff described a range of features of good practice in relation to learning and development. This section reports on these features, focusing in particular on personal, social and emotional development, early language and communication and cognitive development.

### Personal, social and emotional development

Settings placed personal, social and emotional development at the centre of their practice. They described their aim as supporting the ‘whole child’ – viewing their role as broader than supporting cognitive development and placing equal emphasis on the aim of fostering happy, confident and sociable children. It was only from this stable foundation that children could thrive and develop cognitively and therefore high priority was given to effective practice in this area.

#### Self-regulation and independence

Settings saw themselves as having an important role to play in fostering independence and developing children’s self-regulation<sup>5</sup> and ability to manage their own feelings and behaviour. Staff identified the following features of good practice:

- Fostering independence by encouraging children to do things for themselves. This ethos was applied across all areas of the curriculum from self-care e.g. putting on clothes and washing their hands to serving themselves at snack times and tidying up after activities. The impact of this ethos was particularly noted by parents, who described seeing an increase in independence.
- Involving the children in decision making was felt to encourage children to think for themselves and view themselves as individuals with valid opinions. Staff described consulting children on the activities they wanted and incorporating these ideas into their curriculum planning. They also used circle time to discuss the reasons for rules and boundaries and encouraged children to contribute their own solutions to issues.
- Wherever possible children were supported to find their own solutions to conflicts:

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<sup>5</sup> The development of self-regulation in early years has been linked with successful learning, including pre-reading skills, early mathematics and problem solving. More detail can be found in the Education Endowment Foundation’s Early Years toolkit: [EEF Early Years toolkit](#)

*'We always try and... put it back to the child, to get them thinking about it.. we'll come over and we'll question the children, 'What's the problem here?' Then they'll say, 'I want the hat.' 'How many children are there?', 'Oh, there's three children', 'Oh, there's three children, one hat, so what can we do?' You know, so we'll put it back on the child quite a lot which works very well. So if you're getting them to question it, you're getting them to understand... so I think that helps the children really self-regulate their behaviour well.'*

(Setting staff, Voluntary setting, South East)

### **Social skills**

To support children to form friendships and develop social skills, settings described a range of strategies:

- Staff modelling prosocial behaviour and treating the children and each other with respect, was identified as a key feature of good practice.

*'I think you've got to have good role models, and I think that's where your teams come in. So you're trying to talk properly.. it's about that good modelling.. You know, adults not sitting on tables, because that's not what we do. About adults picking up rubbish off the floor, or picking up toys off the floor, because we don't just expect children to behave like that; we expect the adults to behave like that. About showing an interest in children and what they've got to say.'*

(Setting manager, Nursery class, West Midlands)

- Small group activities were used to discuss feelings and emotions and to encourage children to work together, to take turns and to share. This was felt to be particularly valuable for quieter children to draw them out and support them to form friendships.
- Snack and mealtimes were used as an opportunity to foster prosocial behaviour and encourage children to sit together and listen to each other.
- A consistent approach to behaviour management across all staff was viewed as essential so children understood what was expected of them and the boundaries. Staff talked about using positive behaviour strategies which praised good behaviour and tackled unwanted behaviour by offering positive alternatives as effective approaches.

### **Wellbeing**

Settings described one of their primary goals to be fostering happy and confident children, and from a parent perspective this was paramount.

- Positive and warm relationships between staff and children were felt to be essential from a setting perspective because these relationships meant children felt comfortable in the environment and were able to express themselves.

*'You definitely need to know that child and that child needs to trust you as well because obviously a lot of them are here from half past 7 'til sort of 5 o'clock-ish, so they need to know that they can come to you and ask you anything and tell you anything, interact with you in whatever way they need to.'*

(Setting staff, Private setting, East Midlands)

Parents also highly valued these relationships and described the positive impacts of them on their children:

*'I think because they absolutely love the main teacher.. I mean they adore her and the other teachers and they really want to please her and I think that's because she is so genuinely interested in them, and obviously is very fond of them and children sense that in teachers. And so, if she's asking them to sit quietly, or who can be the quietest, who can be the most helpful, they just want to please her and I think, well, it works for [my daughter] anyway.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

- Setting staff identified consistency and routine as features of setting practice that helped children feel safe and secure, which in turn encouraged confidence and a willingness to try new things. Parents highlighted this as a feature of setting practice that had supported their children:

*'[My children] have all felt very stable there. The [setting manager] never changes, everything's really consistent, so the children know exactly what's expected of them, you know. Every morning they go and sit down, every morning it's the same routine, before they go off and do their different activities. So, I think for the children, they know exactly what's coming, nothing's confusing or new.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Private setting, South East)

- Developing good relationships with parents was felt to be vital so that setting staff understood the home context and parents felt able to alert staff to any issues that they needed to be aware of (discussed further in Chapter 5). The positive impacts of this were highlighted by one parent who appreciated the support her son received when his sibling was seriously ill:

*'They were aware of his home situation, which enabled them to support him better in the school environment. But they also provided him with good emotional support and spent that little bit of extra time with him. So I think that's very important and that's been a very good experience I think with [my son's setting]. I think that has quite an important role to play.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Private setting, Yorkshire and Humberside)

## Early language and communication

To support early language and communication, settings identified the following features of good practice.

- Creating a 'language rich' environment through the use of songs, nursery rhymes, stories and providing time for adult/child and peer to peer interaction. Staff talked about the importance of extending children's language and enriching their vocabulary and parents noted the impact of these strategies on their children:

*'They don't speak to them like young children, they just speak to them on a normal level and I think that helps a lot and I think it helps a lot that they don't necessarily speak to my daughter the same way I would. They use different words, different vocabulary and I think that helps because it exposes her to all sorts of learning.. and I think that's a good thing.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

- High quality adult/child interactions were viewed as essential for speech and language development. Staff spoke about sustained shared thinking<sup>6</sup>, listening to the child and the importance of having one-to-one time with them as key features of this. This positive interaction was also highly valued by parents:

*'It's just the fact that I think [my son] really likes all the teachers, and when they talk to him they get down and they're looking at his eyes.. I know they are really busy and I don't know how they do their job, but somehow it feels like they seem to have time for him, you know, time for him to talk and time for him to chat about the activities he's doing, and I think that's why he seems really happy going in every day.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

- Using assessment effectively to identify any developmental delays in speech and language and putting in place additional support.
- Encouraging home learning and the quality of parent/child interactions through providing activities for children to do at home with their parents and encouraging reading at home. Supporting home learning is discussed further in Chapter 4.

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of 'sustained shared thinking' has been defined as 'An episode in which two or more individuals "work together" in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend.' (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002)

## Cognitive development

A priority for setting staff was to instil a lifelong love of learning in the children they cared for, and strategies to foster this were felt to underpin good practice in relation to cognitive development.

- Settings described taking a 'child-led' approach to cognitive learning and development. This meant capitalising on the interests of individual children to maximise their engagement, which in turn led to effective learning:

*'So they have different things laid out for them. So they have a choice to choose what they want to do, what interests them. And if they ever get bored, or have had enough at one station they can always move to the next station. I think having the chance to choose what you want to do, and what you want to learn, yeah, it's quite a positive thing for them.'*

(Parent of four-year-old, Private setting, South East)

- Staff professional knowledge and skill was viewed as critical for effective learning and settings prioritised this through staff recruitment, retention and continuing professional development (discussed further in Chapter 4).
- Access to a wide range of resources that covered all areas of the curriculum and were age appropriate was felt to be important. To maintain interest and engagement, settings stressed the importance of variety and range, particularly in the case of children who attended full-time.
- Settings also highlighted the value of visual aids to learning so that children could see what was going on. Examples included using egg-timers for turn-taking, using visual timetables, and using picture cards that depicted the instructions staff were giving verbally.
- An enabling environment was felt to play a role in supporting learning and development. Furniture and equipment had to be age appropriate and settings thought carefully about how the environment – indoors and out, was being used and how it could be improved to make it more effective in supporting learning.

## Supporting transition

This section looks at how settings manage transitions into the setting, within the setting and from the setting to school and other providers.

### Supporting transitions into the setting

To support smooth transitions into settings, staff identified features of good practice in relation to three broad areas – gathering information about the child and using this

effectively; providing support to parents; and helping the child to settle. These areas are discussed in turn here.

### **Gathering information about the child**

Staff reflected that it was important to gather information about the child to support a smooth transition into the setting. Information about the child's interests, likes and dislikes, family context and routine were used to help build a relationship with the child and engage them in activities they were interested in.

Settings gathered information about the child in a number of different ways:

- **Home visits and gathering information from parents**

In some settings prior to a child starting staff visited the child and parent in their home. Settings carried out these home visits to observe the child in their own environment and begin to build a relationship with them and their parents. Setting managers reflected that the visits helped to identify specific issues - for example, speech and language, and social and emotional development, and also helped children feel more comfortable when they started:

*'We believe we have less children crying and upset now. Because they know that that key worker has talked to mummy, they've been to their house, they've read them a story, they've taken the toys, and that when they start, that key worker then talks to the parents, talks to the child, takes photographs of the family, and builds up a relationship with that child.'*

(Setting manager, Nursery class, West Midlands)

Parents welcomed these home visits, seeing them as a way for staff to find out about their child and use this information to help them settle:

*'[My son] sat on the floor playing with.... his key worker, for a good 20 minutes, you know, and didn't even bat an eyelid, that I was busy talking to somebody else... It was good, it was a nice touch, yeah.'*

(Parent of two-year-old, Voluntary setting, South East)

Settings also gathered a range of information from parents to help them plan activities that would help the child settle and give them an understanding of their current stage of development. Typical information gathered included detail of any medical issues, dietary needs, their routine and the key people in the child's life, and their stage of development.

- **Working in partnership with other settings**

Where children moved from other providers, staff worked in partnership with that provider, to gather relevant information and support the child with the transition. Good practice included staff visiting the child at their previous setting where possible. The following case example illustrates the benefits of this kind of partnership working to support transition:

### **Case example of partnership working with another setting**

This primary school nursery built a strong relationship with a local private nursery that was offering places to two-year-olds (many of whom would transition to the school nursery when they turned three). The school nursery staff visited the setting regularly, developed relationships with staff and shared resources. Through this positive relationship the setting gained a better understanding of the children and their needs before they started, enabling them to plan ahead and put strategies in place to support those children:

*'We would go down and visit regularly, build up those relationships with the staff, but it also meant that there was quite a group of children that we knew for a year before they started here.. There were quite a few learning difficulties in that group that we could start to understand before they started with us.. The [school] SENCO, she went down to visit as well, so we could see what was in place, what strategies were in place, and we also could then meet with those parents and also external agencies before the child started.. Before, we didn't know the children at all.. whereas now.. with some children that go to the private nursery, we are getting more of an insight before they start'* (Setting Manager, Nursery Class, West Midlands)

### **Providing information and support to parents**

Staff reflected that as well as settling the child, parents also needed support during the transition. Elements of good practice identified by settings when supporting parents with the transition included:

- **Communication with parents during the settling in period**

Settings stressed that it was important that parents were able to contact the setting at any time while their child was settling in. This was achieved by providing parents with a range of ways to contact staff and encouraging them to get in touch if they needed to. Where a child was finding it particularly difficult to settle, parents appreciated staff proactively keeping in touch to reassure them that their child was fine.

- **Providing information to parents**

To facilitate transition, settings felt it was good practice to ensure parents had clear information about the setting including information about the staff, curriculum and structure. Settings provided this in a wide range of ways from open days, induction meetings, parents evenings, home visits, and drop-in sessions.

## **Supporting children to settle**

- **Setting visits and familiarisation**

In preparation for joining, settings provided opportunities for new children to visit the setting so that they could get to know the staff, the environment and the other children. Settings approached this in different ways for example providing open days/ mornings, having trials sessions, offering open stay-and-play sessions and having an open door policy for families to visit outside these times.

*'It's hugely important, we feel, for the children settling in that they've seen us before, that they've seen our faces.'*

(Setting manager, Nursery class, South East)

### **Case example of techniques used to support children to settle**

This private preschool in the South East provided new children with a booklet about the setting, that included a photograph of themselves, the staff and a picture of the preschool teddy bear that the children could take home with them. This was viewed as positively by parents who felt it was an effective way of preparing children for joining:

*'When they start every child gets a book with their name on, and there's a picture of all the teachers in, .. and then it says, 'We're looking forward to seeing you at [setting name].. And it's just a nice little booklet for the child and the parents to go through before they start, really, and say, 'This is what you're going to be doing'.. it said which teacher she was going to have as well, actually, which group she was going to be in. So yeah, she quite liked that. She got quite excited about it.'*

Parent of four-year-old, Private setting, South East)

- **The settling-in period**

Settings described taking a gradual approach to transition, gradually increasing the time a child attended the setting. This was adapted to suit the needs of the child so that the setting went at their pace as well as the needs of the family. Settings that had large numbers of children starting at the same time, used a

staggered entry approach which meant a small group of children started each day, allowing them to give each group more individual attention.

Settings varied in the extent to which they encouraged parents to stay at the setting to help the child settle; some settings were flexible and gave parents the choice to decide how long they stayed, and this was the preferred approach from a parent perspective.

- **Activities to engage the child**

Setting used the information gathered about the child from home visits and discussions with parents to engage children in activities that interested them. Parents reflected that this approach was very effective and supported effective transition:

*'They know that he loves dinosaurs and they said to me the night before, 'We'll get all the dinosaurs out so as soon as he gets here we can go straight to something he just loves doing, and we can play and try and take his mind off it', and they did.... if they say they're going to do something, it feels like they'll really do it. So, they were there ready, when we got there the next day. They were really good in distracting him straightaway.. And I could see through the window that they just distracted him perfectly.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

- **Consistency and routines**

Staff viewed having routines, and staff being consistent with these, as an important way of helping children to settle. An example of this was a setting who used a visual timetable so that children could see what was happening next and when their carer was going to collect them. Time spent reassuring children and supporting them to understand what was happening was particularly appreciated by parents:

*'She helped him a lot, she did charts for him so he knew his daily routine, like she'd put pictures of different activities and then he could choose and put them in the order that he wanted to do [them]. So he knew what was going to happen for the day. And then he knew at the end of it I would come back.'*

(Parent of two-year-old, Voluntary setting, South East)

- **The role of the key person**

In line with the EYFS framework (DfE, 2014b), settings allocated a key person to each child. The key person was felt to play an important role in supporting the child to settle by spending time with them and providing them with comfort and reassurance. Some settings reflected that it was good practice to be flexible and change the key person if a child was bonding with a different member of staff.

Parents appreciated the role of the key person, reflecting that it helped ensure transitions were smooth:

*'I think [the key person role is] really useful so that they can really watch particular children in a group. .... and [for] all my children, it helped with the settling in process because they would go to their key person and they would make sure that they were okay sitting down with them or whatever. Often they'll sit on their laps to start with when they're.. really small. So, yeah, that really helped the settling in, definitely.'* (Parent of three-year-old, Private setting, South East).

## Managing transitions within settings

In case study settings that cared for children from a young age, systems had been put in place to facilitate smooth transitions between rooms as children developed from infants, to toddlers to pre-school age. This section focuses on good practice in relation to managing these transitions.

### Support for children transitioning within settings

Settings described making decisions on when a child was ready to transition between rooms on an individual basis. Factors taken into account depended on the stage they were moving too, but typically included an assessment of their social skills, language, level of independence and confidence, whether they were emotionally ready to deal with this move and support themselves, and how well they engaged in activities in the new room. Some settings with rooms that were age based also offered flexibility in terms of when the child was ready to move.

Once the decision to move a child had been made, good practice in relation to facilitating the transition included:

- Supporting the child by visiting the new room on a number of occasions before the permanent move. Settings thought it was important that this was phased so that children could gradually get used to the new environment and staff.
- Allocating children a new key person when they moved rooms and offered flexibility for this to be changed if the child was bonding with another member of staff.
- Adapting their approach to the individual needs of the child. Settings reflected that it was important that the transition was made at the child's pace. For example a setting highlighted that if a child was having difficulty settling in they could spend half the time in their previous room and half the time in the new room. This flexibility was appreciated by parents:

*'They could have easily just been a little bit more strict about that...But they were quite flexible that way, and they were willing to let [my daughter] take her own time to settle.'* (Parent of three-year-old, Private setting, South East)

## **Support for parents during transitions within settings**

Prior to a child moving rooms, settings informed parents about the plans and gave them an opportunity to meet the new key person and to visit the new room. Keeping parents informed facilitated the transition because parents were able to prepare their child for the change:

*'Well they've kept me completely informed every day when you pick them up. It's 'Right tomorrow we're doing a taster session for him in the next room. He'll be in there for two hours'. These are the kinds of things they'll do. So they give you the information that you need so that you go in in the morning and you're prepping the child on the way to nursery saying, 'Today you're going to go into the next room. You're going to go into [the next room] and it's – wow it's going to be great. You're going to do this, you're going to do that'. So the kid's actually expecting it when he gets there which I like.'*

(Parent of four-year-old, Private setting, Yorkshire and Humberside)

## **Information sharing between staff**

To facilitate the transition, settings shared information about the child between staff. This included detail on their progress to date, their next steps, and the nature of any difficulties or successes. This sharing was typically done through meetings between the old and new key person.

## **Managing the transition to school (or to another provider)**

Settings highlighted three key areas as important in managing the transition to school or another provider - sharing information effectively, working with parents and supporting the child.

### **Sharing information with schools**

Settings prioritised effective information sharing with schools, reflecting that it was important that schools had sufficient information to prepare for their new cohort. To facilitate this, settings shared information with schools by:

- **Providing transition reports**

Settings shared information about the child with their new setting by sharing transition reports. Settings included a range of information about the child in these documents including the child's current stage of development, any specific needs including anything pertinent to the child settling at school, and detail of any external agencies involved. Settings also shared the child's progress record so that the new setting had a complete picture of the child's progress and development. Feedback settings

received from schools indicated that these reports were useful, providing reception teachers with a good overview of each child's stage of development and other useful contextual information.

- **Inviting schools to visit the setting**

Encouraging schools to visit the setting to talk to staff and meet the children that would be joining them in reception was felt to be good practice. In general settings invited the reception teachers however in some instances the head teacher or SENCO from the school would be invited too. Settings viewed these visits as positive because the reception class teacher learnt more about the child and had an opportunity to meet them in an environment they were familiar with.

Where visits from the school were not feasible, settings sent the school information, or arranged to speak on the phone to share key information.

- **Children with additional needs**

Settings reported different ways of working if they were concerned about a child settling in, or if there were additional needs or safeguarding concerns. For example settings invited the school SENCO to the setting to do observations of the child, and organised transition meetings to discuss the child's needs. Any safeguarding concerns would also be shared so that the school would be aware of any issues should these escalate in the future.

- **Working with parents**

Settings worked in partnership with parents and viewed it as important that parents knew what information was being given to the school about their child and had a chance to contribute to this. Settings also felt they had a role to play in offering support to parents with the school application process. Examples of support provided included meeting with parents to explain how the application process worked, providing support with the application itself, informal discussions with parents in relation to choosing schools and extra support specific to the individual child. In one case study setting for example, the SENCO supported the parent of a child with autism, by visiting a range of schools with them to help them find a suitable place.

## **Supporting the child**

Settings supported the child with the transition to school by:

- **Working in partnership with local schools**

Where feasible, settings felt it was good practice to take children to visit the schools they would be joining because it helped them become familiar with the school environment and the staff. Parents viewed these visits positively:

*'There were lots of opportunities to make sure that your child is going to settle into the school and that playgroup can sort of pass on knowledge of the child to the school to make sure that the transition is as comfortable as possible'.*

(Parent of three-year-old, Voluntary setting, South East)

In addition to visiting these schools with the children during transition, settings also described working with them in other ways. In particular settings gave examples of attending schools events and vice versa (e.g. summer concerts, nativity plays, teddy bears picnics), attending play mornings at the school, and visiting the school playground. Regular contact of this kind increased the familiarity of the school environment as well as fostering effective communication between staff.

- **Preparing the child for school**

Alongside information sharing and visits, settings prepared children to the transition to reception in a range of ways:

- Settings prepared children by discussing the move to school and helping them understand what to expect. One setting had recently started 'school groups'; which were weekly groups organised to prepare children for what to expect where they discuss with the children about school and do independence activities such as putting on shoes and coats. Another setting looked at school uniforms that children would wear in catalogues and discuss about school. Another setting discussed about school and road safety.
- Settings helped to prepare children for school lunch routines by providing lunchtime clubs for children who were due to start school that year and parents found these a helpful support:

*'[He] started going to lunch club, just to get him used to sitting down and.. a large group, and eating his own lunch....I think that was really helpful, because, you know, a school is a massive change for them, isn't it, so I think any little preparation you can do helps'.*

(Parent of three-year-old, Private setting, South East)

- Settings introduced activities to help children prepare for school. These included increasing the length of circle time, so children gradually got used to concentrating and listening to adults for more sustained periods of time.

### **Case example of effective school transition support**

This setting took a holistic approach to supporting school transition by sharing information about the child, encouraging schools to visit the setting, and implementing a range of strategies to help prepare the children for the transition.

Information about each child was shared with schools in the form of a transition document that detailed what made them happy and sad, their likes and dislikes, how happy and engaged they were at the setting, their stage of development and what the school could do to support their progress. Parents had an opportunity to contribute to this and it received positive feedback from reception class teachers.

The setting also invited teachers to the setting to meet the child and to show them their development records, and children were prepared for the transition in a range of ways including:

- Using role play after children had visited their school to provide them with an opportunity to speak about the experience and their feelings.
- Preparing children for school lunches by giving them an opportunity to self-serve food.
- Discussing the move to school with them – for example showed them clothes catalogues for children to cut out the uniform they would wear, which helped the child know what to expect

### 3. Management and leadership

#### Key findings

Managers and staff reflected that effective **leaders** in early years were those that:

- Had a clear vision for the setting;
- Valued and fostered team working;
- Had good professional knowledge;
- Engaged effectively with the wider early years sector;
- Sought continuous improvement;
- Fostered good relationships with parents;
- Had strong organisational skills and delegated effectively;
- Prioritised staff continuing professional development (CPD);
- Embedded clear systems and processes.

Staff valued formal **communication** channels including regular staff meetings, but also stressed the value of regular informal communication. Open plan environments were particularly highlighted as a feature that helped this informal communication.

Ongoing **evaluation** was considered a hallmark of good practice. This was achieved through:

- Observations of setting practice by both senior managers and 'peer to peer' and internal inspections;
- Audits of children's progress records and the setting environment;
- Self-evaluation reflection sheets.

To support good practice, settings sought to work in partnership and access **advice and guidance** from a range of sources:

- Local Authorities were felt to play an important role in this by co-ordinating early years clusters; running conferences; delivering training, providing packages of support and providing advice and guidance on SEND and safeguarding.
- Ofsted were a source of support as were specialist services including speech and language therapists, psychologists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists.

Good practice in **partnership working** between settings included:

- Visits and information sharing with other settings;
- Working in partnership with Children's Centres including sharing facilities, and seeking advice and guidance from their early years specialist teachers.

This chapter considers good practice around management and leadership. It focuses on three aspects – leadership, communication between staff and self-evaluation. It also reports on the sources of advice and guidance settings accessed to support and sustain good practice.

## Leadership

Setting manager, staff and Local Authority respondents identified a range of features of leadership felt to underpin good practice, and these are considered in this section.

**Figure 3.1 Characteristics of effective leadership**



Effective leaders were thought to be those that:

- **Had a clear vision for the setting**

Providing a clear vision for the setting was a feature of leadership felt by setting managers, staff and Local Authority officers to underpin good practice because it established the values and principles for the setting and drove expectations, so staff had a clear understanding of their role and what they were working towards. A Local Authority officer described the need for this '*central purpose*' explaining that without it, staff did not understand what they were working towards overall:

*'I think a lot of this comes then down to leadership and management. And I do think that it is about the ethos and about the philosophy that leaders and managers have...Quite often we find things go wrong because there is no central*

*purpose, or there's nothing really driving the provision in terms of what they're doing.'*  
(Local Authority staff, West Midlands)

Setting managers also felt this clear role enabled staff to focus on nurturing children's learning and development and made staff more invested in the setting, which supported retention.

Role modelling what this vision looked like in practice on a daily basis was viewed by setting managers as a useful tool for bringing staff on board with this vision and philosophy. They described using this approach to model undertaking observations, getting down to the child's level or communicating effectively with parents. Setting managers and Local Authority staff felt that a manager should be willing and capable of providing support in all these areas of daily practice, so staff were clear about the rationale behind the vision and their role in it.

In larger settings, role modelling also entailed senior members of staff role modelling for more junior members of staff:

*'My staff are very confident and know that they can always come to me if I'm in the nursery, if needed, and that I'm always around if they do need my help or they are in a bit of a situation...it's all about role modelling and making sure that you are there if needed. And, that you can assist with what the member of staff needs.'*

(Setting Manager, Private setting, Yorkshire and Humberside)

- **Valued and fostered team working**

Setting staff, managers and Local Authority respondents identified setting managers working as part of the team, and facilitating good team working as a further feature of high quality leadership.

*'It's not us at the top and them at the bottom, it's us at the bottom holding them up and I think that's the difference.'* (Setting Manager, Private setting, South East)

Staff described how managers achieved this by listening to them, and valuing their contributions and views, giving staff opportunities to share ideas, and taking on board their contributions with an appropriate level of challenge. Staff felt this degree of challenge was there to ensure ideas and suggestions had a clear rationale and supporting effective learning and development. Setting managers, staff and Local Authority respondents all felt that a strong leader was part of the team, but understood when to lead and make decisions about what was best for the setting overall and the children's needs.

*'[Our setting manager] is such a strong leader, as in she knows when to lead, she knows when to tell us what needs doing, but she's also open to listening to suggestions and ideas and what works.'*

(Setting Staff, Private setting, Yorkshire and Humberside)

A team-based approach that valued staff involvement was also felt to support staff retention, discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

- **Had good professional knowledge and was engaged with the wider early years sector**

An additional feature of leadership thought to underpin good practice was sound knowledge of the early years sector – the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS); changes in government policies relevant to the sector, and recent developments in research. As importantly, effective leaders needed to be able to filter and distil this information – making effective use of what was relevant and disregarding distractions:

*'... there are so many things, so many initiatives, so many documents, so many programmes, and sometimes we find when settings get into trouble it's because they're just trying to do a bit of everything without having that central purpose underneath it. What are we trying to do? What are we trying to achieve?'*

(Local Authority Staff, West Midlands)

- **Sought continuous improvement**

Managers who constantly strived for improvement were felt to support good practice. By seeking to close gaps in their knowledge and practice, and by always looking to improve on their practice, high quality provision was embedded and the needs of children met. Approaches to evaluation are discussed later in this chapter.

- **Fostered good relationships with parents**

Valuing and fostering good relationships with parents was a further feature of leadership that was thought to support good practice because it recognised the need for a joined up approach between the setting and the family for effective learning. Effective managers prioritised these relationships with parents by creating an open culture that ensured staff were readily available and accessible to parents. Staff and managers also prioritised these relationships through being proactive in their communications, for example if there was a behavioural issue they raised it with the parent in a timely and collaborative way. Communications with parents are discussed further in Chapter 5.

- **Displayed strong organisational skills and delegated effectively**

Setting managers, staff and Local Authority respondents were keen to highlight how managers juggled multiple responsibilities and therefore strong organisational and time management skills were vital. These were felt to be underpinned by managers knowing their staff well and delegating effectively.

- **Prioritised staff continuing professional development (CPD)**

Sound knowledge of staff strengths and weaknesses enabled managers to effectively invest in training opportunities for staff. Setting staff, managers and Local Authority staff viewed investing in staff through offering opportunities for training and CPD as another aspect of strong leadership; it meant staff were keeping up-to-date, were trained to think about the individual child's needs, and were being encouraged to reflect on their own practice. Chapter 4 discusses training and CPD in more detail.

- **Embedded clear systems and processes**

Setting managers, staff and Local Authority respondents mentioned the importance of managers establishing clear systems and processes and having oversight of them to strong leadership and management, such as monitoring and tracking procedures. It meant the setting was staying on top of children's development and learning, and so responded quickly to any issues. This is discussed in more detail as part of monitoring and tracking in Chapter 2.

## **Communication**

This section considers approaches to facilitating effective staff communication and how it supports good practice, drawing on the views of setting managers and staff.

### **Formal and informal channels of communication**

Staff and managers were clear about the need for effective communication between staff because it enabled staff to be better and more responsive practitioners – picking up and addressing issues around children's progress, and role modelling good communications for children. Staff also reported feeling happier and more confident in their work when the communication was strong because they felt supported and valued by management. To achieve this, setting managers and staff described the importance of both formal and informal channels of communication.

Formal meetings were viewed as an opportunity to bring all staff together, they provided a dedicated opportunity to discuss anything that was and was not working across the setting. At larger settings this was supported by formal team / room meetings to discuss team / room-specific issues, as well as formal meetings for senior managers to discuss planning and supervision. To keep on top of any issues and see that best practice was

disseminated, managers and staff felt these formal communications needed to take place frequently, although the frequency varied from weekly to every few months; depending on the size and structure of the setting.

Informal communications described by setting managers and staff included day-to-day staff conversations, as well as communications that took place via information boards, Facebook pages and Pinterest, for example. Setting managers and staff felt these informal communications had a vital role to play in ensuring staff were aligned with one another in their approach, and felt supported on an ongoing basis. Use of information boards to facilitate regular informal communications is highlighted in the following case example.

### Case example on the use of information boards

In this voluntary setting, the setting manager was concerned that staff were not communicating with one another, and so introduced an information board where staff could leave messages for each other throughout the day. Staff responded positively, using the information board daily, which closed the emerging communication gap between staff.

### Open plan environments

Setting managers and staff reflected on how open plan and free flow environments made informal communications between staff easier by improving visibility so staff could see, hear and talk to each other easily. Greater ease of communications meant staff could more readily support one another and work together as a team. This setting manager described the ease of communications in an open plan environment, and how it stimulated good team working:

*'You know that the staff get on and I think because we're open plan as well, if they need a hand, they'll just shout to someone in that room or even to me in the office. You know, we're all there within earshot and I think that makes you feel secure in saying and I think that's for everyone's benefit.'*

(Setting staff, Private setting, South East)

## Evaluation

The Ofsted Early Years inspection handbook identifies effective evaluation of staff practice; and evaluation of staff, parent and children views as indicators of high quality Early Years leadership and management (Ofsted, 2015a). The following section draws on setting staff, manager and Local Authority respondent views to reflect on approaches to self-evaluation and how it feeds into good practice.

## Approaches to self-evaluation

Setting managers described their overall approach to self-evaluation as integrated and embedded in their setting's daily practice. They outlined an approach that centred on openness to change, and a willingness to respond to information and feedback collected, whether this meant changing a practice that was not working or extending a practice that was. A setting manager at a voluntary pre-school described this integrated approach:

*'[It is] a thing we do automatically...if something's not working then we change it. Or if something is working we try extending it or doing something else. So it's a case of talking to each other and if there's a problem, you know, they sort it out straightaway.'*

(Setting manager, Voluntary setting, South West)

Local Authority respondents also highlighted how effective self-evaluation was grounded in a sound knowledge of the wider early years sector, including an understanding of shifting policies and procedures, new research, and new initiatives and approaches. Without this understanding they felt setting managers were unable to establish what self-evaluation was trying to achieve at the setting, which was confusing for staff and made it harder for them to engage with it.

### Observations

Staff observations of children, peer observations and manager observations of staff were viewed by setting managers, staff and Local Authority respondents as vital to the self-evaluation toolkit.

Staff observations of children were used to assess how individual children were progressing, but were also undertaken to inform staff practice, prompting reviews of whether activities were meeting the needs of individual children, and whether activities and planning across the setting as a whole needed revisions.

Managers and staff also valued regular peer observations – senior member of staff observing junior members of staff, and vice versa – as crucial to embedding a culture of self-evaluation. They described how these peer observations took place at different times of day and unannounced, which provided a fuller and more accurate picture of staff practice. Peer observations were viewed as supportive and a positive means of encouraging staff to develop their own practice. Manager observations of staff were also seen as necessary because their expertise was felt to encourage and challenge staff to reflect and improve on their practice:

*'So we are constantly around the building watching, observing how staff are with the kids and we challenge anybody here that we think is not right...We challenge them and we try to just tell them that this is the reason why this is not right...there's always a reason and they know and that's why they are more aware when they're doing*

*something, they're ready to question us and we always give them this liberty to question.'* (Setting manager, Private setting, South East)

## **Audits**

Auditing children's progress records and the setting environment were also described by setting managers and staff as a means of self-evaluation. A progress record audit entailed all staff formally reviewing the records of each child to check that they was aligned with the overall plan and that the child's next steps were being taken forward:

*'We also audit the learning journeys. So each term myself and [the Head teacher] and staff from [the setting], keep a learning journey audit. And here we're looking for children's learning stories, checking that they're linking with the book and the planning units are reflected in there.'* (Setting manager, Private setting, North West)

Environmental audits involved undertaking floor walks to review whether the environment could be improved to better facilitate children's learning.

## **Other self-evaluation tools**

Setting staff and managers mentioned a number of other self-evaluation tools used to facilitate self-evaluation, from self-evaluation or reflection sheets, to inspections and appraisals. The following case examples illustrate how settings used these other tools for self-evaluation.

### **Case example of the use of self-evaluation reflection sheets**

This voluntary setting provided weekly self-evaluation sheets. Each day a member of staff was nominated to lead on evaluation, and it was their responsibility to talk to staff members, find out what activities were and were not working in each team and room, and whether any children were a cause for concern, recording all of this information on the sheet. This sheet was fed back to managers, further consideration was given to what had and had not worked, before next steps for the setting and particular children were established.

### **Case example of the use of internal quality audits**

This private nursery was part of a larger chain. The chain conducted quality audits of each nursery, which were described as unannounced and similar to Ofsted inspections. Comprehensive feedback and guidance was provided following an inspection. As a high performing nursery they had not had many visits. However the auditors were still available to provide guidance at other times.

## Partnership working and sources of advice

This final section reports on setting manager, staff and Local Authority respondent views on external sources of support and guidance, and explores how these were felt to help sustain good practice. It also reports on good practice in relation to partnership working within the early years sector.

### Sources of advice and support

Setting managers and staff identified three main sources of support and guidance that were felt to facilitate good practice:

- Local Authorities;
- Ofsted; and
- Specialist practitioners and services.

Each of these sources and the type of support accessed is considered in turn below.

#### Local Authorities

There was a general sense from setting managers and staff that, as a result of cuts in Local Authority funding in recent years, the support available from Local Authority early years teams had reduced although the extent to which this was the case varied. However setting managers and staff still sought and valued Local Authority support as a key support in maintaining good practice and described accessing a range of services:

- Conferences and network events

Local Authorities organised conferences and networking events that brought settings together. They were seen as an important source of peer support where settings could share ideas and approaches, offer guidance and establish links. The case example below illustrates some instances of Local Authority run conferences and networking events.

#### Case example of Local Authority run conferences / networking events

This Local Authority ran an annual early years conference, which included a range of workshops. Each annual conference had a theme. The latest conference focused on the environment (e.g. how children learn in different environments, and how they access different materials); it was well attended. This Local Authority also ran an early years network meeting; their forthcoming event is for managers on developing leadership skills.

- Cluster networks and meetings

Local Authority respondents described co-ordinating cluster networks across the wider early years sector. These networks served a similar purpose to the conferences and networking events by providing a forum for settings to share ideas and good practice, and establish links with each other.

### **Case example of Local Authority cluster networks**

This Local Authority hosted termly cluster meetings, in each Children's Centre area. They were delivered by the Local Authority team, but the focus was on providing opportunities for settings to establish links with each other. Recently an outstanding setting linked up with a setting that required improvement to share their expertise.

- Training

Training provided by the Local Authority was viewed by as a vital source of support because it helped staff to keep up-to-date and refresh their knowledge, which facilitated higher quality provision. This is discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

- Targeted support packages

Local Authority early years teams also offered settings targeted support packages, focused on issues identified by Ofsted as areas for improvement. Increasingly Local Authorities described rationing this support and focusing on settings with 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' Ofsted judgements because of funding constraints. Some settings and Local Authority respondents voiced concerns over this because of the limited support available to settings judged to be good or outstanding.

- Moderation

There were examples of Local Authorities supporting early years settings with effective assessment by co-ordinating across-sector moderation of these judgments, improving their reliability and robustness.

### Case example of Local Authority support

This Local Authority had a structured support programme for settings, which was particularly targeted at settings that were rated 'inadequate'. Support was coordinated into one Local Authority action plan, so all the actions required of the setting were in one central document. For example, it included actions from the team providing inclusion support, from Children's Centre teachers and from the Early Years Development Team. One action plan was viewed as more efficient and easier for setting to implement:

*'We have a team around the setting, which includes all of the people in the Local Authority that would be going in to support that setting. So we make sure that they have one Local Authority action plan, so we don't have inclusion support coming in and giving them their actions; we don't have the Children's Centre teachers coming in and giving them their actions...we coordinate it so that they have time to turn things round.'* (Local Authority staff, West Midlands)

- Support for SEN and safeguarding

Finally, Local Authorities provided support and advice to settings on safeguarding concerns – immediate issues and long-term planning needs. They also provided support for children with SEN, for example through the provision of dedicated support officers and facilitating SEN networks.

### Ofsted

Setting managers and staff identified Ofsted as a source of support, specifically for guidance on policies and procedures.

Local Authority respondents expressed concerns that a potential backlog of poorer quality settings was being created because inspections were too infrequent, and because Local Authorities had to focus most of their support on settings that were judged to be requiring improvement or inadequate. They felt that settings that were just on the cusp of being 'good' could slip because they were receiving less Local Authority support.

### Specialist practitioners / services

When settings needed child-specific support they sought help from specialists, such as speech and language therapists, psychologists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists. Settings with a dedicated SENCO felt that this played a key role in linking up the various specialists involved to ensure they were working together as a unit, which was seen as particularly important when children had complex and multiple needs so the right package of support was put in place and children's needs were met:

*'...it's more of a circle now than just separate strands. Everybody's working in the same way for that child's benefit. So, if we get a, a child in that has significant needs, we will make the initial referral to [the Local Authority Early Years team] and then it will go onto speech and language if necessary.'*

(Setting manager, Private setting, South East)

## **Nature of partnership working**

Overall, setting managers, staff and Local Authority respondents reported strong partnership working in recent years. This increased partnership working was linked to reductions in Local Authority support available, which created a need to find alternative sources of support. Local Authorities were still viewed as playing a crucial role in fostering this partnership working through co-ordinating conferences and facilitating cluster networks and meetings. However settings had also responded to changes in the levels of support available from their Local Authority, by setting up peer support networks to support high quality provision.

Partnership working was identified by setting managers, staff and Local Authority respondents alike as serving four main purposes. It was a tool for:

- Sharing ideas, knowledge and good practice;
- Sharing resources;
- Providing continuity of care for children; and
- Obtaining support about a specific issue.

Therefore it was an important means of driving up overall standards of provision, as well as improving support packages for specific children. Setting managers and staff identified two main groups that settings worked in partnership with – other settings and Children's Centres. The nature of partnership working with each of these groups is considered in turn here.

### **Other early years settings**

Firstly, partnership working with other settings was described by setting manager, staff, and Local Authority staff as an invaluable means of settings sharing:

- Learning about curriculum planning;
- Strategies and approaches for dealing with child-specific issues;
- Resources;
- Good practice.

It was felt to provide settings with a quick and efficient way for settings to learn and develop professionally because this partnership working could simply involve an informal visit to another setting, or a phone conversation following a networking event, which also helped settings to feel part of a community.

*'... sometimes visiting other practices is the best thing you can do...if you're on a network meeting and someone's in a similar setting to you, and maybe has a solution to a problem you've got, you can share some good practice with them. The best thing to do is say, 'Come and see me. You know, I can show you this in ten minutes,' rather than a two-hour training session picking out the bit that would help you.'*

(Setting Manager, Nursery class, South East)

Managers, staff and Local Authority respondents felt this partnership working with other settings not only improved provision at individual settings, but improved provision across the board because it fostered a more joined up approach when children transitioned between settings (transitioning is discussed in Chapter 2).

### **Children's Centres**

Setting staff and managers described partnership working with Children's Centres in order to obtain advice on specific issues, such as speech and language referrals, as well as general issues; all of this advice was viewed as valuable to improving the setting's provision. The case example below outlines an instance of partnership working between a setting and a Children's Centre.

#### **Case example of partnership working with Children's Centres**

This private Day Nursery described how staff from their local Children's Centre ran a weekly song and rhyme group at their setting, which benefited the children's learning, and gave setting staff an informal opportunity to seek advice. An early years specialist teacher from the Children's Centre also visited the setting frequently. The teacher gave staff pointers on areas they could improve on, as well as guidance on child specific issues.

## 4. Staff recruitment, retention and development

### Key findings

High quality staff were viewed as the foundation for good practice. When **recruiting staff**, settings looked for staff with:

- A good understanding of child development and the EYFS;
- High quality interactions with children;
- Enthusiasm for early education;
- An ability to communicate with and engage parents effectively.

Qualifications were valued and in settings that employed a qualified teacher, staff felt this added an additional focus on teaching and learning and improved the quality of curriculum planning and assessment.

Experience was also highly valued, and careful consideration was given to the mix of staff within settings to ensure that less experienced staff were supported by more experienced colleagues.

Features of good practice that supported **staff retention** included:

- Good communication and team work;
- Strong leadership;
- Flexible working practices;
- Strategies that made staff feel valued (e.g. social events and discounted fees for their own children to attend the setting);
- Opportunities for career progression.

High quality settings prioritised on-going **continuing professional development (CPD)** to develop professional practice; to keep up-to-date with new research on effective practice; to build networks and share good practice and to support staff retention.

Barriers to effective CPD included cuts in Local Authority funding that had reduced the availability of external training; and pressures on setting budgets that made it difficult to release staff for training because of cover costs. Approaches taken to overcoming these challenges included:

- Internal training delivered by senior practitioners;
- Feedback from peer-to-peer and senior manager observation;
- Strategies embedded to disseminate learning from external training courses to all staff;
- On-line training courses;
- Supporting staff and apprentices to work towards qualifications.

This chapter reports on issues related to staffing, focusing on recruitment and retention of staff alongside approaches to continuing professional development (CPD).

## Recruitment and levels of staffing

### Recruiting staff

When asked to identify the factors underpinning good practice in early years provision, setting managers, staff and Local Authority respondents repeatedly identified high quality staff as key to good practice and consequently settings worked hard to identify and recruit good staff. Essential qualities they looked for when recruiting staff were:

- Professional knowledge

Setting managers stressed the importance of staff having a thorough knowledge of child development, an understanding of the EYFS and an understanding of their role in supporting learning and development. In some case study settings, only staff with a minimum of a Level 3 qualification were employed, while others stressed the importance of on-going training and high quality CPD to support staff to build and maintain this knowledge.

- Quality of their interactions with children

Setting managers described looking for evidence of high quality interaction with children, including the use of age appropriate language, eye contact, getting down to the level of the child and open questioning. Managers also described looking for confidence, empathy and an enjoyment of working with young children.

- Vocation

Setting managers and staff reflected that high quality staff pursued a career in the sector because of a love of working with children and a passion for supporting their early development. Consequently, settings looked for evidence of this vocation and enthusiasm when recruiting staff:

*'I always say none of us do our job for money; it's definitely not a money orientated job. It's because you love it.'*

(Setting staff, Voluntary setting, South East)

- Ability to work as part of a team

With team working identified as key to effective practice in relation to curriculum planning, assessment and monitoring and engaging effectively with parents, settings were looking for staff that could work well in a team and were adaptable.

- Ability to communicate and engage with parents

The importance of working effectively with parents to support child development was reflected in settings looking for staff who could communicate effectively with parents and build positive relationships.

### **Views on staff qualifications**

The EYFS statutory framework stipulates that setting managers must hold at least a full and relevant Level 3 qualification, and half of all other staff must hold a Level 2 qualification. Ratios of staff to children are dependent on the age of the child and the qualification levels of the staff<sup>7</sup>. From September 2014, staff newly qualifying at Level 3 must hold GCSE Maths and English at grade C or above to be counted towards Level 3 ratios.

Previous research has shown a strong association between the qualifications of setting managers and staff and the quality of early years provision (Karemaker et al., 2011; Mathers et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2010). Case study setting staff recognised the importance of qualifications and particularly highlighted the value of staff having a thorough understanding of child development and the EYFS curriculum. The change in September 2014 to require newly qualifying staff to have GCSE maths and English at grade C or above to count towards Level 3 ratios was welcomed by some as a way of raising standards, but others felt it acting as a barrier, disincentivising staff who might otherwise have trained to Level 3.

Not all case study settings employed a qualified teacher, but where this was the case (and this is a statutory requirement in maintained nursery classes in schools), settings and Local Authority staff felt this added an additional focus on teaching and learning and improved the quality of curriculum planning and assessment:

*'From my point of view.. we want people to be the best and most relevantly qualified to work in early years as possible, and I feel very, very passionate about that. I don't think we should have any Mrs Cannybody off the street working with our youngest children because we wouldn't do it with our Year 6 children. You know, if we're saying you've got to have a teacher in Year 6, then you've got to have a teacher in nursery, and that was the best thing that ever happened as far as I am concerned.'*

(Local Authority staff, North East)

In addition to qualifications other considerations were also highly valued and factored into recruitment decisions:

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<sup>7</sup> The statutory requirements relating to ratios of staff to children are outlined in full in the EYFS statutory framework (DfE, 2014b)

## The role of experience

Experience gained from working in the early years profession was highly valued by setting managers alongside qualification levels:

*'I know it's written down, I know it's in books, but experience is everything - at spotting that child in the corner. At spotting that child protection case. At spotting, you know, the need for the next step in academic learning. From my experience I can see the staff who are more experienced tend to have that.'*

(Setting manager, Nursery class, West Midlands )

Good practice was felt to be underpinned by employing experienced staff and careful consideration was given to the mix of staff within settings to ensure that less experienced staff starting out in their careers were supported by more experienced colleagues.

## Challenges to recruitment

Although skilled and qualified staff were considered a foundation for good practice, settings highlighted a number of challenges they faced in recruitment.

- Status of the early years profession

Setting managers reflected that the status of the early years profession has historically been low and often presented as an easy option for students who were struggling academically:

*'They should never sell it in schools as 'Go, do childcare.. you know if you can't do biology.. I mean I've sat in a [school] assembly.. and they actually said, 'Well those who won't be doing the academic subjects more or less will be doing either hairdressing or childcare' and to me childcare should be up there [and treated] with quite high esteem'*

(Setting manager, Voluntary setting, Yorkshire and Humberside)

This low status was felt to have contributed to the sector struggling to attract the calibre of staff required to deliver high quality Early Education.

- Remuneration

Linked to the perceived low status of the early years profession, setting managers and staff reflected on the low levels of pay staff could typically expect and highlighted how this did not fully reflect the importance of the profession, the skill levels required and the demands of the role. This in turn made it difficult to recruit and retain highly qualified staff:

*'I think what would help is if we were able to afford more highly trained staff.. The only way we're going to get progression in the early years sector is if we have highly educated people, delivering our curriculum.'*

(Setting manager, Voluntary setting, South East)

Recent policy changes including increases in the minimum wage, pension auto-enrolment and the planned extension of funded provision from 15 to 30 hours for working families were all factors identified as putting additional pressure on pay.

- Working patterns

Settings that operated on a sessional part-time basis highlighted the challenges they faced in recruiting staff because they were not in a position to offer full-time positions. At the other end of the spectrum, day nurseries that were typically open for long hours, identified the long hours as a factor that could make recruitment and retention challenging.

## **Staffing levels**

Some case study settings operated with more staff than required to meet statutory requirements. Where this was the case, settings felt this underpinned their good practice by enabling staff to spend more time with each child and give them high quality individual attention. Higher ratios were also felt to give staff more time to carry out observations and improved the quality of curriculum planning and assessment. The ratio of 1:13 for settings with a qualified teacher was particularly highlighted as too low:

*'I think it needs to be looked at in terms of if we want to be providing these experiences and opportunities for children, then can we really do that on a one-to-thirteen ratio? Because in my experience, I don't think you can.'*

(Setting manager, Nursery class, North West)

The reality for a number of case study settings however, was that it was financially unviable to operate at ratios lower than the statutory requirements.

## **Retaining staff**

The difficulties in recruiting staff and the high value placed on staff experience as a foundation of good practice, meant settings viewed retaining staff as a priority. Parents also appreciated settings that had stable staff because they would get to know staff well and their children would have time to build up relationships with them (discussed further in Chapter 5).

Beyond offering fair pay, features of good practice felt to support staff retention were:

- Good communication and team work

When long serving staff were asked why they had stayed at their setting, good working relationships and respect for colleagues was regularly identified as a key factor. Environments where staff were encouraged to give their feedback and were provided with regular forums to air their views and concerns were also particularly valued:

*'I think people just really enjoy the job. I think people enjoy working with each other. We respect each other. We respect the manager. She respects us... it's that mutual respect we have for each other and, as I say it's a friendship. Sometimes you don't feel like you're coming to work and I think that's why we keep the staff, because it's such a happy place to be.'*

(Setting staff, Voluntary setting, Yorkshire and Humberside)

- Leadership and vision

Setting staff identified strong leadership as a factor in staff retention. Managers with passion and energy were inspirational and good managers were viewed as those that were able to recognise the strengths of their staff and utilise these effectively.

A shared purpose and vision was also important for staff retention. Staff described having a common purpose in providing high quality early education for the children in their care and a clear understanding of how they were aiming to achieve this:

*'So we all know what we're doing. We all know what our roles are and [the setting manager is] very good at feeding back other things from what's happening in the rest of the school.. So I think that helps with good provision.. Because we all know where we're going. We're all sort of like singing from the same song book as it were.'*

(Setting Staff, Nursery class, South East)

- Valuing staff

While staff acknowledged that pay was often low, settings could show their appreciation for staff hard work in other ways. Examples of strategies used included giving staff paid leave on their birthdays, offering discounted places to the children of staff, holding staff social events throughout the year and running award schemes that recognised staff contributions. A culture of regular verbal acknowledgement and thanks from managers was also highlighted as important.

- Flexible working practices

Setting managers recognised the importance of supporting work-life balance. Staff appreciated settings which accommodated requests for exceptional leave, and cultures where staff supported each other by swapping shifts when necessary.

Offering term-time only contracts to staff with young families was also identified as a support to staff retention.

- Career progression

In small settings the opportunities for career progression were limited and this was a challenge for staff retention. Some settings aimed to compensate for limited opportunities for career progression by ensuring staff had access to training to develop their practice in this way. In larger settings or those that were part of a chain, there was greater scope for career progression.

### Case example of strategies to support career progression

In this large day nursery with over 200 registered places, staff had scope to develop their careers within the setting because of its size and the number of staff it employed. The setting had introduced a pay grade system which recognised qualification levels, level of experience, responsibilities and performance. The system was felt to be effective in incentivising staff to continue their professional development, take on new roles and develop their careers within the setting.

## Continuing professional development

This section reports on the role of CPD in sustaining good practice and how case study settings identified and met training and development needs.

### Views on the value of continuing professional development

High quality staff equipped with the knowledge and skills to deliver effective early education was viewed by setting managers as a foundation of good practice:

*'It's your staff that take up the biggest amount of your time because unless you invest in them and unless they know their job inside out and they're doing it to the best of their ability that's when issues start to occur.. My staff are my biggest, biggest asset and my biggest worry.'*

(Setting manager, Private setting, Yorkshire and Humberside)

Settings prioritised on-going high quality CPD for a range of reasons:

- It supported staff to keep up-to-date with changes in policy and new research on effective practice.
- It refreshed and developed staff professional practice and encouraged self-reflection.

- It provided opportunities for networking and sharing good practice, which could then be incorporated into their own practice:

*'Training is so important for high quality teaching, because you need to know what is up to date and you need to know where you're going... For me with being a SENCO I need to know from other professionals what it is that I need to be doing with these children that have additional needs.. So, for me it's important to have that additional help with outside agencies and for me to relate it back for our members of staff.'* (Setting staff, Voluntary setting, Yorkshire and Humberside)

- It increased staff retention by supporting career development and providing a stimulating working environment.

### **Identifying staff training and development needs**

Setting managers described three ways in which staff CPD needs were identified:

- Supervision and appraisal

A regular cycle of supervision and performance appraisal provided setting staff with an opportunity to discuss training and development needs.

- Audit and self-evaluation

Setting managers described using evidence drawn from self-evaluation and regular audits of their practice to identify training and development needs. In one case study for example, the setting manager observed a weakness across the setting in relation to behaviour management. In response, the setting put in place all staff training on behaviour management strategies to improve practice in this area.

- Ofsted

Ofsted inspection judgements were used to identify areas of setting practice that needed to improve. This in turn, fed into CPD planning for the following year. Staff working in nursery classes in maintained schools, also described drawing on their school development plan to identify priority areas for training and development.

### **Approaches to CPD**

Case study settings met CPD needs in a variety of ways:

- Internal training and development

Settings and Local Authority staff observed that pressures on budgets were making it increasingly difficult for settings to release staff to attend external training courses because of the costs of providing cover:

*'[Our Local Authority] used to do lots of after-school training.. They seem to have stopped all that. And those training sessions were great for networking, great for sharing and getting ideas... And most of the training now, if it is happening, it's going to be within working hours, and I wouldn't necessarily be able to go to all of it.. because.. you won't get a supply teacher in here, because it's a private setting.'*  
(Setting staff, Private setting, South East)

As a solution, setting managers and staff observed that a cost effective approach to CPD was for senior staff to deliver internal training. These sessions often ran during staff meetings, during inset days, or as part of a series of twilight sessions to avoid additional costs of providing cover for staff absence. In one case study setting for example, senior managers had developed a series of twilight CPD sessions during which staff were encouraged to identify and carry out their own individual research projects on aspects of early years practice that interested them. This approach was viewed as effective because it encouraged staff to reflect on their own practice, while also providing new insights into ways of improving the setting.

- Learning through experience and observing colleagues

Setting staff highlighted the value of learning through experience and the huge improvements in staff expertise and professionalism to be gained from staff learning from each other and drawing on the knowledge and experience of more senior practitioners. Staff regularly fed back the value of observing other staff members practice and seeking their advice and guidance and there were examples of settings putting in place a model of 'peer to peer' observations to encourage reflection and self-evaluation.

- External training and development and networking

Settings observed that cuts in Local Authority funding had reduced the availability of external training as traditionally, Local Authority early years teams have played a major role in supporting the early years sector through the provision of training. Settings and Local Authority officers observed that reductions in this provision were a risk to sustaining good practice. However, where possible settings remained committed to providing opportunities for staff to attend external training courses and network events.

To maximise cost effectiveness settings had put in place strategies to disseminate learning from training courses to all setting staff. In one case study for example, time was put aside during weekly staff meetings for staff who had attended training courses to feedback on what they had learnt.

- Online courses

Some settings had subscribed to online training providers so they could access a range of online courses for their staff. This was viewed as a cost effective and convenient format for training, particularly for larger providers and nursery chains with large staff bodies.

- Apprenticeships and accredited qualifications

As discussed earlier, setting staff valued qualifications, but reflected that these qualifications had most value if acquired alongside practical hands on experience. Consequently, some settings worked closely with local colleges and regularly took on apprentices and supported them through their Level 2 and 3 qualifications. There were also examples of settings supporting staff to work towards higher level qualifications by giving them time off to study, providing advice and guidance and facilitating course work based on practice at the setting.

It was less common for case study settings to pay course fees for staff because of the expense. However, one large nursery chain had developed an in-house training scheme that was accredited so that staff could acquire their Level 2 and 3 qualifications while working at the setting.

## 5. Engaging with parents and home learning

### Key findings

Parents judged the **quality** of early years settings based on:

- Their 'word-of-mouth' reputation;
- Staff/child interactions;
- Staff/child ratios;
- Staff retention;
- Facilities and equipment;
- Safety and security.

**Staff qualifications** were important to some parents, while others assumed that all staff would be relevantly qualified or prioritised experience of working with children and the quality of the staff/child interactions over qualification levels.

Effective **communication with parents** was supported by:

- Being non-judgemental and building trust;
- Getting to know parents individually and tailoring the mode of communication to their preferences;
- Ensuring effective communication between staff so that *all* staff felt able to answer parent queries.

Approaches for keeping parents information of their child's progress included:

- Parent feedback books;
- Providing opportunities for parents to volunteer at the setting;
- Parents' evenings;
- Online assessment and monitoring systems that could be shared with parents.

To support **home learning** settings used a range of strategies including:

- Offering personalised advice and guidance on an ad hoc basis;
- Making suggestions through newsletters and emails and providing activity sheets;
- Inviting parents into settings to observe specific sessions (e.g. on phonics);
- Encouraging reading at home by regularly lending books;
- Giving careful consideration to the frequency of home learning suggestions;
- Establishing good relationships with parents before making suggestions for home learning;
- Giving children an element of choice and control over the activities to increase their engagement.

This chapter considers good practice in communicating and engaging with parents and supporting home learning. It explores three key areas:

1. How parents choose an early years setting and form a judgement about its quality.
2. Communication between setting staff and parents and views on effective practice.
3. How settings support home learning and views from parents and setting staff on effective practice.

## How parents choose an early years setting and form a judgement about its quality

This section explores how parents defined good quality provision, and what sources of information they drew on to make judgments when choosing an early years setting for their child.

Parents described a variety of motivations and reasons for taking a place at an early years setting. These motivations varied slightly depending on the age of their child. For the parents of two-year olds, motivations included:

- **Socialisation** – parents were keen to ensure that their two-year old socialised with other children, particularly in cases where the child did not have siblings.
- **Speech and motor-skills development** – parents wanted to support their child's speech development through interactions at the setting with staff and other children. Some parents also mentioned the development of motor skills through access to equipment and facilities the setting could provide.
- **Feedback about their child's development** – another motivation for parents was to receive feedback and reassurance from setting staff that their child's development was on track.
- **Independence and confidence building** – parents were keen for their child to attend settings to increase their independence and confidence.
- **Childcare** – parents needed childcare for a range of reasons including enabling them to return to work or care for other children.

Parents of three- and four-year-olds held many of the same motivations but were also increasingly motivated by the desire to prepare their children for school. For this group, motivations also included:

- **School preparation** – parents wanted to ensure that their child was used to the routine, structures and expectations of a group based setting in preparation for starting school.
- **School places** – In some cases, parents placed their child in a setting attached to a certain school in the expectation that their child would attend the school the following year. The expectation was that familiarity with staff, the environment and their peer group would support a smooth transition to school.

## Word-of-mouth reputation

An influential factor for parents when choosing their early years setting was its reputation amongst their network of friends, families and the local community. When discussing the reputation of a setting, parents focused on:

- How friendly and professional the manager and other staff were perceived to be;
- How other children had progressed academically and socially at the setting. For example, if nieces or nephews had attended the setting and ‘got on well there’, parents trusted that their own child would also;
- Whether the setting was perceived to be in demand or have a waiting list, as this reinforced a settings good reputation amongst parents.

## Quality of staff

A judgement about the setting staff was formed by parents from the ‘word-of-mouth’ reputation of the staff and their own judgements made on initial meetings and open days. Staff interactions with children, their qualifications and staff ratios at the settings were all considered important factors:

- Staff interactions with children

For parents, a key feature of a high quality setting was that the staff welcomed and interacted with their child at the child’s level and took a genuine interest in them:

*‘I’ve just always felt welcomed in that building as opposed to, ‘oh, you’re just a parent’ and the child is just money being dropped off, which is the vibe that I’ve had in other places.’*

(Parent of two-year-old, Voluntary setting, South West)

Staff being friendly and welcoming and interacting positively with their child was a key priority:

*‘I wanted a place that was going to be really welcoming, that when they walked in the door there would be somebody sat down at his level [to] greet him, look in his eyes and say, ‘Hello, Mark, how are you’, and make him feel really welcome.’* (Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

- Staff qualifications

Parents had a range of views about the qualifications they expected staff to have as well as mixed views about the extent to which staff qualifications were a factor in creating and maintaining high quality settings. Their views can be broadly categorised into three:

1. Parents felt it was important that all staff members held, or were working towards, a relevant qualification (such as an NVQ level 3) and enquired with

the setting about this before enrolling their child. These parents held the view that higher staff qualifications meant the overall provision of care would be to a higher standard.

2. Parents felt it was important that all staff members hold a relevant qualification but assumed that settings would only employ staff members who had this, and therefore didn't ask the setting about this prior to enrolling their child.
3. Parents were less concerned that staff had a relevant qualification, and instead prioritised experience of working with children and the way that staff interacted with their own child:

*'They knew how to deal with children and just the various types of personalities that children can have, they dealt with that successfully. So I didn't sort of specifically go to look at the bits of paper that they were holding.'*

(Parent of two-year-old, Voluntary setting, South West)

Some parents for example, described feeling more comfortable with settings that employed more mature members of staff, valuing their life experience and their experience of working in the early years sector for longer.

- Staff-child ratios

Generally, parents were informed about the ratio of staff to children at welcome days or in their welcome packs. When asked during interviews, parents rarely knew the exact ratio of staff to children at their setting, but some parents actively chose settings on the basis that they felt they were well staffed and they felt they would be able to give their child the individual attention they needed. This is reflected in the following comment from a parent who chose a preschool over a school nursery, partly because of the higher staff/child ratios :

*'[High staff/child ratios] helps with their upset when they go in, or if they have some different issues.. so that [staff] can give that one-to-one attention from time-to-time.. whereas in a nursery school situation, you know, they go in and it will be two members of staff to that number of children, where they can't give that individual attention, really, and the encouragement as well.'*

(Parent of four-year-old, Private setting, South East)

- Staff retention

Parents were reassured by settings with good staff retention at this was thought to indicate that staff were happy in their jobs and the setting was well run. It also provided reassurance that the setting could provide continuity and stability:

*'I always find it's very positive if there's not so many changes in staff...I find people stay for a long time, so it must be quite a nice and friendly'*

*environment to work at which I think is really good because it's good stability for children.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

### **Facilities and resources**

Parents described the importance of having good facilities at the setting, including a good range of toys and activities that were easily accessible, as well as adequate space within the setting and outdoor areas. Parents were particularly keen for their children to have access to activities they might not have at home:

*'I like the fact that everything is child height, very accessible, there's a free flow to what they can get out. For example, the craft area, they have little trays so they can get whatever they want out rather than it's set out for them'.*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

### **Safety**

Parents expected settings to have good security and safety measures in place, including physical security and staff trained in first aid. Parents described the importance of feeling comfortable that their child was in a safe environment and staff members would know what to do should an accident or incident occur.

### **Location and cost**

Location was a key aspect of decision making for parents, due to the convenience of having a setting close to home, work, or siblings' schools. Costs were also a factor in decision making. There was a broad range of circumstances amongst the parents who were interviewed. Whilst some parents were in two-income families and could afford to pay the fees of the setting of their choice, others would not have considered early years settings at all without the offer of a funded place.

### **Sources of information parents draw on to judge quality**

This section focuses on the sources of information that parents drew on when making judgements about the quality of a setting.

As previously mentioned, the reputation of a setting amongst friends, family and the local community was an important source of information that parents used to judge the quality of the setting and its suitability for their child. Parents also used the following sources of information to inform their decision making:

#### **Online forums**

Some parents used online forums to talk to other parents who had knowledge of the setting, or whose child had attended the setting.

*'There's forums locally where people are asking 'what do people think of this school, what do people think of that school', because obviously everyone is going through the same process at the same time...it's all very kind of open, honest people's views of what schools are better'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

## **Ofsted reports**

Parents had a range of views about the relevance and usefulness of Ofsted reports which can be categorised into three broad viewpoints:

1. Parents chose not to look at Ofsted reports before choosing a setting. In some cases this was because they held the view that as Ofsted was only there for a day, and they would rather judge the setting quality themselves through its reputation and through their own observations. In other cases parents did not look at Ofsted reports because they found them difficult to understand.
2. Parents looked at the Ofsted reports to help them to make a judgement about quality but also took into consideration other factors such as the settings' reputation and their own 'gut feeling' about the setting. In some cases, parents described how if the setting had been rated 'outstanding' but they personally didn't like the feel of it when visiting, they would have 'ruled it out'. In these cases, the Ofsted rating was useful but was not the most important factor in the judgement of quality.
3. Parents looked at the Ofsted rating and the reports in full and used this information to make a decision about the suitability of the setting. In general, parents didn't consider settings below a 'good' rating. As well as looking at the overall rating for the setting, parents also looked at the report to establish the inspectors' view of the setting such as the reported levels of staff engagement with children:

*'We read through the report, we were looking for the overall grade obviously an indicator of how well they are [doing] ...And there were a few other bits where they kind of really excelled in, ... I think it was the engagement of children and the feedback to parents as well is really well rated.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, West Midlands)

## **Setting visits**

Settings offered parents the opportunity to visit the setting before their child enrolled and parents used this opportunity to judge the quality of the setting for themselves. When visiting a setting, parents were particularly interested in the following:

- The facilities and environment (including cleanliness and whether there was outside space);
- The activities on offer;

- The staff interactions with the children;
- The number of staff present;
- The perceived professionalism and friendliness of the manager and other staff.

## Communicating with parents

This section focuses on good practice in relation to communication between setting staff and parents and examines the range of approaches taken and views on what works.

### Informal face-to-face communication

Informal face-to-face communication with parents was considered an extremely important and effective means of communication amongst setting staff. Commonly, face-to-face communication entailed 'having a quick chat' with parents when they dropped off and picked up their children. This ad-hoc communication was part of a wider culture which setting staff aimed to foster of openness and availability of staff.

This openness was felt to underpin effective partnerships between the setting and the parents. In particular, staff highlighted three important features of good practice in relation to face-to-face communication:

1. The importance of being non-judgemental when communicating with parents, befriending them and building trust, particularly when children were transitioning into the setting:

*'I think the relationship with parents which has been one of my focuses for this year is really, really building up that trust and always having the door open and always, always trying to meet parents with understanding before judgement...we can't walk in somebody else's shoes. We've just got to try and understand and if we've got a good relationship with the parents then, ultimately, that's going to benefit the child.'* (Setting manager, Private setting, North East)

2. The importance of knowing each parent individually in order to understand the level of information and the mode of communication which suited them best and tailoring their approach accordingly.
3. Staff working closely together to ensure that all members of staff (not just the child's key person), knew their background and individual needs and were able to answer questions from parents.

This informal face-to-face communication was also valued by parents:

*'Those little chats in the morning and at lunchtime...it's just so nice to hear your [setting] say 'Oh, she's had a really good day...she seems to be making lots of friends.' It's a bit more personal'* (Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

In particular, parents highlighted the importance of not being rushed or made to feel they were making a fuss over nothing when raising an issue with setting staff:

*'Anyone I've ever gone to, even with a slight concern, just over something like really silly, they've always... listened and will talk to you about it and then come back to you at a later stage just to check that you're now feeling comfortable with whatever the issue was. You're never made to feel like either you're not important or you're making a fuss about nothing.'* (Parent of three-year-old, Private setting, South East)

### **Email, online and text message communication**

Settings used emails to update parents on a range of things including details of upcoming events. In some settings, email was supplementary communication to letters and/or online communications and in other settings, email was the main source of written communication with parents. Text messaging was used by most settings for quick reminders to parents for things such as upcoming events or weather conditions and Facebook pages were used in a similar way.

From the perspective of parents, emails and text messages were generally viewed as useful tools for communication which provided them with the information they needed. In particular:

- Receiving reminders about events and activities by email and Facebook was generally useful for parents and helped them to organise their time.

However, whilst some parents liked the use of social media (such as Facebook) due to its convenience and its immediacy, other parents were concerned about the privacy and security of social media and preferred other forms of communication.

- Receiving information about what activities their child was participating in and what theme the setting was focused on for the week or term, was valued by parents. Some parents used this information to replicate the same routine and activities with their children at home. This is explored in more detail in discussion of home learning below.
- In some cases parents preferred hard copies of letters to emails as they were able to place these in their kitchen or on their fridge to act as reminders. Other parents also did not like to use technology to access information about their child after using technology all day:

*'I have got a phone, I have got a computer, I use it at work all day long and when I come home it's the last thing I want to look at, absolute last thing'.*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, West Midlands)

## Visual displays

Settings used notice boards both inside and outside the setting to communicate with parents on a range of topics including:

- Upcoming events such as parent evenings or concerts;
- Weekly or termly learning themes;
- Introducing staff, their roles and qualifications;
- Updates on what the children had been doing during the day, and in some cases, suggestions about what learning could be continued at home.

The immediacy of notice board communication that was updated regularly was valued by parents, particularly where it detailed what the children had been doing that day because it supported parents to involve their children in discussion.

## Written feedback and daily diaries

Some settings opted to provide written sheets or diaries for the younger children outlining the activities the child has taken part in as well as what they had eaten and any significant milestones the child may have reached during the day. The time required to complete these was felt to be feasible because of the higher staff ratios for two-year-olds. They were generally completed by the child's key person and were viewed as useful not only for parents but also for other members of staff who may be speaking to parents at the end of the day.

Parents found these sheets particularly useful in cases where they were not able to have informal chats with their child's key person because other relatives or carers collected the child:

*'We fill in every day what the children have had to eat, what sleep they've had, what the nappies have been, what they've been playing with, any 'wow moments', as we call them...and that's there for the parents to take away at the end of the day. Obviously we still talk to them, we talk through things, but it's there for the parents who are a little bit rushed at the end of the day sometimes because they just want to get home.'* (Setting staff, Private setting, East Midlands)

## Parent feedback

One way setting staff tried to facilitate more consistent communication with parents was to provide them with parent books which allowed both parents and staff to write information about the child and their progress. Parents were encouraged by staff to write any changes or developments in order to keep the setting up to date. In some cases, settings then used the information provided by parents to re-inforce behavioural strategies within the setting and to help integrate children socially.

### Case example of effective communication between setting staff and parents:

This private setting in the South East used 'Wow Cards' to engage parents and to forge two-way communication regarding the child. Parents were invited to write down important milestones for the child or activities they had been doing whilst at home on an ad hoc basis. This information was used by setting staff to engage in conversation with the child and to expand their own understanding of the child's home life, interests and hobbies.

Setting staff explained how this communication helped to extend learning to the home:

*'I had a boy - a child last year...he couldn't listen and then we have the 'wow sheets' parents can fill in, and we sent his 'next steps' home and I've noticed over the last year his mum kept bringing lots of 'wow notes' where she was showing how they were trying to extend that at home, which obviously is brilliant. Not all parents [are] that receptive to it, but it's helped to bring him on, and it could be in lots of different areas.'*  
(Setting staff, Private setting, South East)

### Parent volunteers

In some case study settings, parents were given the opportunity to help at the setting for some sessions. This was encouraged by staff once the children were settled into the setting (usually after the first term). For parents, this was an opportunity for them to see their child in the setting and to engage more significantly the setting and staff. Although not all parents had the time to do this, those who did, recommended it:

*'You've also got the option of going in and helping some mornings, which I did when [my son] was there, and they're more than happy...It's fascinating.. It was really nice... I'm definitely going to do it again.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Private setting, South East)

More informally, some parents also attended coffee mornings and outings with the settings which provided a sense of community amongst the parents and encouraged engagement in the life of the setting.

### Case example of effective communication and engagement with fathers

One voluntary setting had set up 'Dads and Grandads Stay and Play' sessions on Saturdays for male relatives of the child – targeting fathers in particular. This was set up in response to a lack of communication from fathers and grandfathers at drop-off and pick-up.

Setting staff found that having a time dedicated to male relatives of the child helped to engage them in the life of the setting – allowing them to have a greater understanding of the child's life at the setting and to interact with staff and each other. Having this on a Saturday was important in ensuring as many fathers as possible could attend:

*'There's not enough dads and granddads being involved with [nursery]. They are a little bit, anxious and scared of interactions with staff... We found that stay and play group has helped dads to interact with each other and find out what nursery is about... They can help themselves to toys and children can show them what they are doing'. (Setting Manager, Voluntary setting, South East)*

### Keeping parents informed of their child's progress

Settings used a number of ways to keep parents informed of the progress their child was making, including parents' evenings, written progress records and online systems. Each approach is explored in detail below:

**Parents' evenings** were used by settings to:

- Update parents on the progress of their child (showing the parent their file or progress record) and what they could do to support their child;
- Ask questions about the child's home life and whether parents were facing any difficulties with their child at home;
- Ask parents about the child's interests to help inform curriculum planning.

Generally parents engaged with parents' evenings and found them useful as a way to keeping up to date with their child's progress, although some parents chose only to attend parents evening when they had a particular concern about their child.

Parents' evenings were typically held twice a year at settings, however some settings had alternatively opted for weekly drop-in sessions during which parents could book one-to-one sessions with staff to discuss progress:

*'Last year in the nursery I did parent-teacher consultation evenings, which the rest of the school do, but we felt this year that we would try doing the drop-in sessions*

*instead, because we didn't always have that much of an uptake in the evenings and I think some parents found it hard to attend. So far it seems to be working quite well, that parents are coming to see me on a weekly basis rather than perhaps waiting for those sort of termly parent-teacher consultations.'*

(Setting manager, Nursery class, South East)

**Progress records** were used by settings as a way of updating parents about their child's progress and forging two-way communication. These records consisted of observations, photos, and examples of the child's pictures and work. In some cases parents were also encouraged to contribute to the record with any activities the child had done at home.

These records were generally well received by parents who felt they gave them a sense of their child's day to day activities as well as their general progress:

*'We've discovered that he's progressed quite a lot from an art skills perspective and he's started to write his name and [It's good to] understand what they are doing on a daily basis.'* (Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

However, the progress record needed to be comprehensive and updated regularly in order for parents to find them useful. Furthermore, where progress records were the only or the main form of progress updating, some parents would have preferred to have a more detailed explanation of their child's progress, preferably face-to-face.

### **Online assessment and monitoring systems**

As discussed in Chapter Two, some settings used online assessment and monitoring systems as a means of sharing progress with parents. These online systems were updated regularly (ranging from daily to weekly) and in some instances the systems were interactive and encouraged parents to upload videos, photos or comments about their child's progress at home.

Parents generally felt that these online systems provided more regular updates on their child's progress than more conventional methods (such as parents evenings) and some parents described logging on several times a week. In particular, parents highlighted a number of benefits for them:

- Parents valued the immediacy of online systems which allowed them to observe what their child had been doing during the day:

*'I love the fact that when they add stuff to [the online system] you can see it straightaway, so you get a little email to say there's been an update, and I love all that, because you can see any new stuff that [my son] has done...they were doing things outdoors like balancing, and twirling, and all that sort of stuff, and I know [the setting] take time to concentrate on various aspects of their development, which is great.'* (Parent of two-year-old, Voluntary setting, South East)

This made them feel more in touch with the setting and more informed about their child's progress. In particular, parents were interested in how their child was performing against the expected level of development for their age and found online systems that made this clear particularly useful.

- Parents generally found these systems easy to use and welcomed the fact they could access them in a range of ways at a time that was convenient for them (such as an app on their phone while they're at work).

However, these positive views were not shared by all parents and some reflected that they did not access the online systems and preferred to see their child's work at the setting itself, where they could discuss their progress face-to-face with staff:

*'This is something that kind of meets sort of various Ofsted criteria to get an outstanding...this is maybe one of the things that Ofsted are saying these settings should be doing. But for a parent, from my point of view - I can't speak for any other parent - it's probably less good because I have to physically go on, find a logon and look at it and I just never do.'*

(Parent of two-year-old, Voluntary setting, South West)

## Supporting home learning

There is existing research evidence indicating that parenting practices such as reading to children, warmth in interactions and responsiveness are all associated with better developmental outcomes (Bradley, 2002). Furthermore, the home learning environment has long been established as having an influence on the cognitive ability of children (see for example Melhuish et al, 2008a, Lugo-Gill and Tamis-LeMonda, 2008).

This final section examines how settings encouraged and fostered an effective home learning environment and focuses on three key areas:

1. Views on the value of home learning for children and families.
2. Approaches taken by settings to foster a good home learning environment, and views on the effectiveness of these approaches.
3. The facilitators to supporting home learning.

### Views on the value of supporting home learning

Setting staff highlighting a range of benefits of effective support for home learning:

- **Ensuring consistency between home and setting** and developing a consistent message about the value of learning as well as consistent behavioural strategies were highlighted as benefits of working with families to support home learning. This was important in ensuring children were making progress whilst at the setting:

*'If we're expecting a child to behave in such a certain manner or way, to resolve conflicts or how to deal with anger.. and if we're teaching them one thing and if they're going home and the parents are letting them get away with it or doing something totally different, it'll confuse the child, because the child won't know what's the right thing to do and what's wrong, and they won't move forward.'*

(Setting staff, Nursery class, North East)

- **Increasing parent/child interactions** was viewed as a key aim of supporting learning at home. Activities that encouraged this interaction were prioritised and settings tailored activities to be as inclusive and easy to follow as possible to enable all parents to participate.
- **Learning for pleasure** and in particular, reading for pleasure from an early age were viewed as important goals settings hoped to achieve by supporting the home learning environment. Activities given to parents therefore encouraged daily interactions and in many cases resources such as books were shared with families.

### **Approaches to supporting home learning environment**

To encourage a rich home learning environment, settings took a variety of different approaches. This section explores these and the views of setting staff and parents regarding their effectiveness.

- **Personalised advice and guidance about learning at home** - as mentioned previously, having close relationships with all parents was considered key in ensuring consistency between the home and setting. Staff, particularly the child's key person, therefore offered ad hoc advice and guidance to parents about specific issues affecting the child. This advice was hugely varied and covered areas of development including numbers, letters, and pencil grip, as well as practical advice on issues such as toilet training and healthy eating.

Whilst some parents sought out this support from setting staff, some staff discussed the need to slowly build relationships with parents before they reached a point where they were able to offer parent's suggestions and advice about home learning.

- **General guidance to promote learning in the home** – some settings used newsletters or emails to give guidance to parents about everyday learning they could facilitate at home. Rather than structured activities such as activity sheets or tasks, settings suggested ways parents could incorporate learning into the child's everyday life. Ideas such as counting the number of trees on the way to the setting, or talking about the shapes of items in the home were encouraged.

Such suggestions were generally given weekly or monthly. Some setting managers discussed the importance of only giving suggestions on a monthly

rather than weekly basis, in order to not 'over-load' working parents, which could lead to a sense of guilt and therefore disengagement:

*'By giving them the whole month..., they might have [one weekend] free and they think, 'Oh, we can do that...'. Because I'm a working mum with two children and I know there's so much guilt that can be involved when you're not there and that's the last thing I need to put on parents here.'*

(Setting staff, Private setting, South East)

While some parents already used these techniques with their child and therefore did not feel they needed tips such as these from their setting, some first time parents in particular spoke about the usefulness of such techniques:

*'[The setting] try and tell us ...if you really want to help her, then you can ...show her numbers, and...try and encourage her to talk about numbers in shops, supermarkets when you take her outside for shopping, things like that. So I think these are things which, as first-time parents sometimes you wouldn't think of. You would just probably think it's a supermarket: you just go for shopping and come back, with the child. You just want to get it over with... So I think that sort of input from them really, really helps us.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Private setting, South East)

Another similar technique used by some settings was to provide parents with information about the learning their child was focused on at the setting (via a parent book, notice boards or online system). This encouraged parents, without pressure or formalisation, to replicate learning in the home and to share any home learning with the setting in return.

### **Case example of facilitating the home learning environment**

To facilitate home learning and to encourage a connection between the setting and home, one setting in the East Midlands used a teddy bear which children took it in turns to take home. Children could choose which activities they wanted to do with the bear and were encouraged to take photos and write down what they had done with their parents.

Settings then used this to initiate discussions with children and to promote language use both at home and back in the setting.

*'What we'll do is at group time, probably on a Monday morning, if [the bear has] been home over a weekend, we'll sit down and we'll be like 'oh, let's see what so-and-so got up to today with our little weekend bear', and it's really nice because then that child really interacts and starts telling us about their weekend so again, it's developing that speech.'* (Setting staff, Private setting, East Midlands)

**Structured activities and 'homework'** – In other settings, a slightly more formalised approach was taken where parents were given activity sheets to complete with their child either as an alternative to the approaches above, or in addition. Structured activities and homework were more commonly given to parents of three and four-year olds rather than two-year olds. Activities included things like dot-to-dot, phonics activities and activity sheets focusing on numbers and letters.

There were mixed views from parents regarding how appropriate activity sheets were for children of this age. Some parents held the view that their child was too young for structured learning at home and that this was already being covered by the setting:

*'I wouldn't want personally any structured learning at home; I just don't think it's necessary at this age, unless they're really struggling with an area which is obviously kind of a different matter... I think if they're having three hours of structured learning like that a day they actually don't need any more.'*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

Parents at the other end of the scale not only embraced the activity sheets given to them but also expressed a desire for more frequent structured homework with more of an academic focus (such as a greater focus on numbers) as this would help to prepare their child for school.

**Classes at the setting to promote home learning** – some settings ran open classes (such as phonics sessions) for children where parents could watch sessions and get tips and advice about what they could also be doing with the child at home. In the case of hard-to-reach parents, some setting managers explained that these open classes were often beneficial in opening a dialogue with parents about their child's learning:

*'For the harder to reach parents, we would try and bring them in. We would try and put some support around them to begin to access school with confidence because if a family isn't wanting to bring their child to school, then it can be for all sorts of reasons really and we just try and understand the reasons behind that.'*

(Setting manager, Nursery class, North East)

**Book and activity libraries** – some settings encouraged children to take home a new book each week which would be read as a bedtime story. This was set up as an initiative to encourage parents to read with their child regularly:

*'Reading for pleasure, reading from a very early age is very important. And what parents don't realise is the importance of bedtime stories, and to get children used to the structure of books, the excitement of books. So it's trying to encourage parents, 'Can you read this before your child goes to bed?'*

(Setting manager, Nursery class, West Midlands)

In cases where parents couldn't read, settings encouraged them to look at the pictures and the structure of the book with their child. Parents were generally positive about the

initiative and felt that it worked particularly well because the child could choose the book themselves. This meant that it was a book, and a topic they were interested in:

*'They do a school library swap system every week, so every Monday he comes home with a different book which is of his choosing, so it's always about dinosaurs,... but that's been really nice because you can tell he's quite interested in it because he chose it. He really likes coming home and reading it, he loves books anyway, so that really works'.*

(Parent of three-year-old, Nursery class, South East)

In other instances, settings put together activity packs that children could take home. Examples included a playdough activity pack to encourage development of fine motor skills.

### **Facilitators to supporting home learning**

The following features of good practice were identified which were thought to support and encourage home learning:

- The frequency of activities or suggestions provided from the settings was an important facilitator to parents' engagement. Having activities or exercises to complete too frequently meant that some parents found it difficult to participate due to other pressures such as work and caring responsibilities. Overall, it was felt that having suggestions for activities once a month was 'manageable' (although there was some variation amongst parents with some welcoming more frequent suggestions). Parents also welcomed activities that could fit into their existing daily routine e.g. bed time stories, activities to do while shopping etc.
- Setting staff recognised the importance of ensuring a good relationship was established with the parent before sending home homework or activities. For some setting managers this meant that they did not give parents any activities to do within the first term and in other settings they waited to get to know individual families before suggesting activities at home:

*'I felt it was important for this term to really get to know the family. To start to understand some of the challenges that the families have and to work out whether it's appropriate or not to send home a sheet of work or send home a reading book and expect something back from those parents.'*

(Setting manager, Private setting, North East)

- Parents reported that having activities which the children had choice and control over was an important factor in engaging the child in the activity. Being able to choose their own books or choose what to do with the 'activity bear' meant that they were more engaged from the outset. This was important as when the child was engaged, parents felt more motivated to complete the activity.

- Finally, a key facilitator for settings was the way staff approached the topic of homework and of home activities. Setting staff observed that some parents had anxieties about being able to do the activities at home or anxieties about not having time to complete them. Staff reported that building good relationships with parents before suggesting home activities was key to alleviating these concerns. It was also important that approaching home learning in such a way that would encourage, but not pressurise or worry parents was seen as very important to its success. This was achieved by not ‘imposing’ too much and by reassuring parents that they would not be judged for not completing activities. Parents appreciated the sensitive way in which settings approached the topic of home learning:

*‘I think that it's just the way that they word it. They don't necessarily say that it is something [my child] should work on. They just said, ‘Oh, this week, we're doing... Can you just practise?’ So, you know, it's just the way that they word it and it's quite a nice way to do it.’*

(Parent of two-year-old, Private setting, East Midlands)

- Although no parents reported directly that they struggled to provide the resources for their child to learn at home, some parents did mention the possibility of other parents struggling to provide items such as books, paper and pencils:

*‘I know it's, it's difficult for families obviously that don't have a lot of money, they might not be able to get their hands on certain things that I'm quite lucky I can get resources from work, borrow them and use them at home. But I think if they gave more resources out to parents, to help development, that would be very beneficial for the children that needed it.’*

(Parent of three-year-old, Private setting, North East)

Settings recognised this issue and supported parents by lending books and in some instances ‘activity packs’ providing all the equipment needed to support an activity.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has identified features of good practice in early education in relation to learning and development; management and leadership; staff recruitment, retention and development; and engagement with parents and home learning. In reflecting on what good practice looks like across these areas, three broad cross-cutting themes have emerged – the importance tailoring practice to the needs of the child above all other considerations; a skilled and experienced workforce and an open and reflective culture.

This conclusion draws the findings of this study together by reflecting on these cross-cutting themes in more detail.

### **Tailoring practice to the needs of the children**

Underpinning good practice was an ethos that placed the child at the centre of setting practice. Systems and processes were developed with the wellbeing and development of the children in mind and this helped settings maintain focus and avoid distractions that might detract from this focus. In practice, this meant settings had a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve for the children in their care, and these clear goals informed all areas of their practice.

In relation to learning and development, this meant settings tailored the curriculum to the interests and needs of their children, found imaginative ways to capitalise on their interests to support their learning and development and built in flexibility so that they could respond to children's changing needs. It meant that high quality assessment and tracking procedures were a priority, with particular emphasis placed on *using* this data effectively to identify and support the needs of individual children and to identify gaps in provision.

In terms of leadership and management, good practice was underpinned by setting managers who had a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve for the children in their care, embodied this vision in their own behaviour and actions and were effective at communicating these goals to staff. This approach (which placed the needs of the children above all other considerations) also underpinned approaches to recruiting staff, with settings looking for staff who supported this focus through high quality interactions with children, and a passion for early education and development.

How settings supported home learning and communicated with parents was also underpinned by this ethos, as it ensured a holistic approach to how they met the needs of the children in their care. With this ethos at their centre, settings were motivated to engage with parents effectively; build strong relationships and support home learning.

## **Skilled and experienced staff**

A second cross-cutting theme was the importance of staff that were qualified, knowledgeable and experienced because it was this skilled workforce that underpinned the practices that supported children to reach their full potential.

In practice, this meant staff needed a good understanding of child development and the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage to effectively meet the learning and development needs of children, and carry out effective planning and assessment. In particular, high quality staff/child interactions were consistently raised as a feature of good practice, and staff with experience and an understanding of how to support children's learning were viewed as essential to high quality practice in this area. Strong relationships with parents and effective support for home learning were also underpinned by staff with a range of soft skills including empathy and effective communication skills

Given the importance of a skilled workforce, settings with good practice worked hard to recruit and retain high quality staff, and prioritised ongoing support for their development. Strong leadership was also considered vital, and good practice was underpinned by leaders who led by example; fostered team work and had a clear vision of what they were aiming to achieve.

## **An open and reflective culture**

The final theme running throughout this discussion of good practice was the importance of an open and reflective culture as this was thought to drive continuous improvement; create a positive working environment and encourage sharing of good practice to increase the quality of the early years sector as a whole.

In practice this meant that setting with good practice, sought out and worked in partnership with other settings and professionals to enhance their own practice, support the practice of others and ensure smooth transitions. They also recognised the knowledge and expertise of their own staff and valued open discussion and staff consultation as a means to improve their practice.

Finally, settings with good practice had embedded a culture of self-evaluation as a means of driving continuous improvement. This meant settings regularly reviewed their planning and assessment practice with the aim of enhancing the learning and development of the children in their care. It also meant self-evaluation and reflection were embedded into their approach to CPD, with staff at all levels being encouraged to reflect on their own practice and that of their colleagues.

## **Next steps**

Future reports from the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) will examine the impacts of early education on child outcomes. The first impact analysis report from the SEED survey of families will report on the impact of early education on child

outcomes at age three; and, a further report will look at findings from quality assessments carried out across one thousand early years settings, examining the quality of early years provision and factors associated with higher or lower quality.

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## Appendix A

This appendix provides detail of the methodology used in this study, including sampling; recruitment and fieldwork and analysis.

### Case study sampling

Sixteen case study early years settings were selected from a sample frame of settings who were assessed as having 'good' or 'excellent' quality provision as part of the wider quality assessment element of the SEED study carried out by 4Children.

The quality assessment visits carried out by 4Children as part of the wider SEED study were carried out in settings attended by children from the SEED survey of families. The instruments used to gather information on process quality were selected according to the age group that were the focus of the quality assessment. For the 2 year old children, the revised Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-R) and the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing scale (SSTEWS) were applied. For the 3 and 4 year old children, the revised Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-R) and its curricular extension ECERS-E, and the aforementioned SSTEWS scale were administered<sup>8</sup>. The ratings were based on a minimum of a two-and-a-half-hour/ three-hour observation in a setting and a set number of interview questions to gather information on indicators that could not be observed. The instruments were scored on a 7-point scale, where 1=inadequate, 3=minimal, 5=good and 7=excellent.

For the purposes of case study selection, the aim was to focus on provision for two-year-olds in half the case studies, and three- and four-year-olds in the other half. Settings were also sampled to include those that were found to have 'good' and 'excellent' quality provision as judged by the quality assessments carried out as part of the wider SEED study.

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<sup>8</sup> Further information on the ECERS and ITERS scales can be found at <http://www.ecersuk.org/>. Further detail on the SSTEWS scale can be found in Siraj et al (2015) *Assessing Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) Scale for 2–5-year-olds provision*

To achieve this, quality was defined in the following way:

**Table 1 Definitions of ‘good’ and ‘excellent’ quality**

Type of setting	Quality definition
Excellent provision for 2 year olds	SSTEWS is 6 and above, and ITERS doesn't fall below 5
Good provision for 2 year olds	SSTEWS is from 4.5 to 5.5, and ITERS doesn't fall below 4.5
Excellent provision for 3 year olds	SSTEWS is 6 and above, and ECERS-E and ECERS-R don't fall below 5
Good provision for 3 year olds	SSTEWS is from 4.5 to 5.5, and ECERS-E and ECERS-R don't fall below 4.5

Providers were also sampled to achieve diversity on a range of other characteristics including the type of provision (e.g. nursery class, private or voluntary funded), geographical region, and the level of deprivation in the local area (as defined by the indices of multiple deprivation) . Table 2 provides an overview of the achieved case study sample.

**Table 2 Achieved sample of early years settings**

Sampling criteria		Achieved sample
Provider type	Nursery class	4
	Private	6
	Voluntary	6
Quality assessment	Good (2 year old)	4
	Good (3-4 year old)	4
	Excellent (2 year old)	3
	Excellent (3 year old)	5
Indices of Multiple Deprivation (1= least deprived, 5= most deprived)	1	1
	2	4
	3	3
	4	3
	5	5
Region	London	3
	South East	4
	South West	1
	East Midlands	1

Sampling criteria		Achieved sample
	West Midlands	2
	Yorkshire and Humberside	2
	North East	2
	North West	1
<b>Total</b>		<b>16</b>

Within each case study, interviews were carried out with the setting leader/manager and typically between two and five members of their staff (depending on provider size and the availability of staff). Parents whose children attending the case study providers were also invited to participate in telephone interviews to feedback their views and experiences of using the case study setting.

In addition, six telephone interviews were carried out with Local Authority staff responsible for supporting the early years sector in their area. These were sampled from Local Authorities in which case study settings were located.

## Recruitment

### Recruitment of case studies

Initial contact with case study providers was made by an introductory email to the setting manager (with a leaflet providing further information about the study – Appendix B). This was followed up by a telephone call to the provider manager to explain the research in further detail and invite participation. Once consent to participate as a case study had been given, researchers worked with provider managers to identify staff who worked with the age group that were the focus of the case study to take part in interviews. Leaflets were provided to staff setting out the aims of the research study, what participation would involve and the voluntary nature of participation.

### Recruitment of parents

To recruit parents to participate in telephone interviews, an ‘opt-in’ recruitment process was carried out. Provider staff distributed letters to parents which set out the aims of the research, what participation would involve and the voluntary and confidential nature of taking part (Appendix C). Parents who were interested in participating were asked to ‘opt-in’ directly to the research team, either by returning a pre-paid slip, phoning a Freephone number or emailing. In this way, case study providers were unaware of which parents took part. Because of the opt-in nature of recruitment, the number of achieved interviews in each case study varied from 0 to 8.

### Recruitment of Local Authority staff

Desk research was initially carried out to identify relevant departments in case study Local Authority areas responsible for supporting the early years sector in their area. Contacts were then followed up by email and phone to identify relevant staff and invite

them to participate in a telephone interview. All LA staff were provided with a leaflet outlining the aims of the research and the voluntary and confidential nature of taking part (Appendix B).

A breakdown of the number of interviews achieved in each case study is outlined in Table 3.

**Table 3 Interviews achieved in each case study provider**

Case study	Staff interviews completed	Parent interviews completed
Case study 1	3 (including two paired)	4
Case study 2	3	5
Case study 3	3 (including two paired)	2
Case study 4	2 (including one paired)	2
Case study 5	3	0
Case study 6	3	2
Case study 7	3 (all paired)	0
Case study 8	5	0
Case study 9	3	6
Case study 10	1	2
Case study 11	4	4
Case study 12	3	5
Case study 13	3	2
Case study 14	3	8
Case study 15	4	2
Case study 16	2	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>49</b>

## Fieldwork and analysis

Fieldwork took place between November 2015 and March 2016. Interviews with early years setting staff typically lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour and were carried out face to face.

The broad topics covered in interviews included:

- Curriculum planning

- Assessment, tracking and monitoring progress
- Staffing
- Communication with parents and home learning
- Within and between setting transitions

Interviews with parents were conducted by telephone as this flexible data collection method meant interviews could be arranged at times most convenient for parents or rearranged at short-notice. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Topics covered in interviews included:

- How parents conceptualised quality in early years provision
- Provider communication
- Home learning
- Perceived impacts of provision

Interviews with Local Authority officers were conducted by phone and typically lasted 45 minutes. These interviews broadly covered Local Authority officers views on:

- Factors underpinning high quality provision
- The role of the LA in supporting high quality provision
- Other sources of support for high quality provision

All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of respondents and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed using Framework - an approach to qualitative data management which is systematic and comprehensive. This approach ensures the study's findings are robust and grounded in the data<sup>9</sup>. Verbatim interview quotations are provided in the report to highlight themes and findings where appropriate.

The project was carried out in accordance with the ISO20252 international quality standard for market and social research.

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<sup>9</sup> Ritchie, J; Lewis, J; McNaughton-Nicholls, C; Ormston, R (2013) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*; London

# RESEARCH PROJECT

# SEED: Good Practice in Early Years Settings

Information for the setting manager



Study of Early Education  
& Development



## Appendix B

### Recruitment leaflet for setting managers

#### What is SEED?

The Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) is a major longitudinal study following 8,000 two-year-olds from across England through to the end of KS1. It is looking at how childcare and early education can help to give children the best start in life and what is important for high quality childcare provision. The study is being carried out by NatCen Social Research, working with Frontier Economics, the University of Oxford and 4Children, on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE). There are a number of strands to the research. For more information please visit [www.seed.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.seed.natcen.ac.uk).

#### What does the research involve?

This study being undertaken as part of SEED is looking at good practice in Early Years Settings through a case study approach. The aim is to explore how settings achieve and maintain good practice to provide examples of what works well.

Each case study involves a NatCen researcher spending a day in a setting to interview the setting manager and around four other staff members (ideally with varying qualification levels).

We are also asking settings to distribute letters and leaflets to parents about the research, so parents can opt-in to take part in a telephone interview. We will arrange the interviews with parents directly.

#### What will the interview involve?

As the setting manager, taking part will involve speaking to a researcher face-to-face for up to 1 hour. The interview will be arranged for a time that is convenient and minimises disruption to your working day. We are particularly interested in hearing about your views on:

- How your setting has achieved and sustained good quality provision
- What factors in your experience contribute to the following:
  - High quality teaching and learning
  - Effective communication with parents
  - Staff retention and professional development
  - Effective management and leadership

There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in learning from your views and experiences.

#### Why are you recording the discussions?

If you are willing we will audio record the discussions. This gives us a more accurate record of what has been said but no one outside of the NatCen research team will have access to the recordings.

#### Complete confidentiality

Responses will be treated in strictest confidence and in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998 with results being anonymised and used for analysis purposes only.

#### What happens after the visit?

Your views and the views of your staff will contribute to a report about good practice in Early Years Settings for DfE. However individuals and settings will not be named in the report. To keep up to date about the publication of the report please visit the SEED website [www.seed.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.seed.natcen.ac.uk)

#### Who is NatCen Social Research?

NatCen Social Research is an independent social research organisation that carries out research on a wide range of social issues. You can find out more about NatCen on our website [www.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.natcen.ac.uk). If you have any questions about the research please contact a member of the research team on <Insert Freephone number and email address>.

# Parent recruitment letter and FAQs

page 2

## FAQs

### What does the research involve?

This study is looking at good practice in Early Years Settings and <insert name of setting> is participating as a case study. The aim of the research is to find out how settings achieve and maintain good practice. Each case study will involve interviews with staff and parents to find out what underpins good practice.

### What will taking part involve?

As part of the case study we would like to speak to parents to hear about your experiences of <insert name of setting>. We are particularly interested in hearing about:

- How <insert setting name> communicates with you
- How they keep you informed about your child's development
- Your views on how the setting is impacting on your child's behaviour, social development and learning

Taking part would involve speaking to a researcher on the phone for about 45 minutes.

Taking part is completely voluntary and the interview would be arranged for a time that is convenient to you (during the day or in the evening). There are no right or wrong answers; we just want to hear what you think. Parents who take part in an interview will receive a £20 shopping voucher in appreciation of your time and effort.

If you are interested in taking part please complete the opt-in form and return it to us using the pre-paid envelope provided. It may not be possible to interview everyone that is interested in taking part.

### Why are you recording the telephone call/discussion?

With your permission, we would like to audio record the discussion so that we do not interrupt the natural flow of the conversation as notes won't be taken down during the call. This also gives us a more accurate record of your views and comments. However, no one outside of the NatCen research team will have access to the recording. We will not tell anyone that you've taken part or what you have said and it is completely up to you whether you take part. Your child's childcare setting is passing on information about the research to parents but the setting will not know who we speak to.

### Complete confidentiality

Your personal details and interview responses will remain strictly confidential and will be handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

### How would the information I provide be used?

Your views will contribute to a report about good practice in Early Years Settings for DfE. However individuals will not be named in the report. To keep up to date about the publication of the report please visit the SEED website [www.seed.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.seed.natcen.ac.uk)

### Who is NatCen Social Research?

NatCen Social Research is an independent social research organisation that carries out research on a wide range of social issues. You can find out more about NatCen on our website [www.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.natcen.ac.uk). If you have any questions about the research please contact a member of the research team on <insert Freephone number and email address>.



Dear Parent / Carer,

### Good Practice in Early Years Research Study

I am writing to invite you to take part in a research study about good practice in Early Years Settings, which NatCen Social Research is carrying out on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE). This research is part of the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED), a major new study that is following 8,000 two-year old children from across England through to their early years in schools. It will find out how early education can help to give children the best start in life and what is important for high quality provision.

### Why are we writing to you?

I am writing to you because researchers from NatCen are visiting <Name of setting> to talk to staff about good practice and how they provide early years education. We would also like to talk to parents/carers of children that attend <Name of setting> to gather your views and experiences of using the setting. Your child's childcare setting is passing information about the research to parents/carers but they will not know who we speak to.

### What will taking part involve?

Taking part is completely voluntary, and would involve a short 45 minute telephone call from a researcher at NatCen. We will arrange a call at a time that is convenient to you. Anyone who completes an interview will receive a £20 shopping voucher in appreciation of your time and effort.

### What do you need to do?

If you are happy to take part please complete the opt-in form enclosed and return it to us using the pre-paid envelope provided to express your interest. We may not be able to interview everyone that is interested in taking part, but we will be in touch by email or phone to let you know.

If you have any questions about the study or want any more information about what it involves contact a member of the research team on <insert Freephone number and email address>, or visit the SEED website [www.seed.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.seed.natcen.ac.uk)

Yours sincerely,  
[insert name]  
Senior Researcher



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# Setting manager topic guide

## Study of Early Education and Development: Best Practice Case Studies

### Setting Manager Topic Guide

#### Aim of the interviews (for researcher)

To understand in depth what underpins high quality practice, and how this is articulated in different Early Years settings and contexts. Interviews with Setting Leaders/ Managers aim to explore from their perspective:

- How high quality teaching and learning is sustained
- The features of leadership & management that contribute to quality provision
- Staffing and issues related to recruitment, retention and work force development
- Home /school partnerships & relationships
- Transitions within and beyond the setting

## 1. Introductions

- Introduce yourself and NatCen
- Introduce the study
- Interview is part of 16 best practice case studies
- Digital recording
- Data kept securely in accordance with Data Protection Act
- How we'll report findings – anonymity of participants and settings
- Reminder of interview length – 1 hour
- Right to withdraw during or after the interview has taken place
- Any questions/concerns?

## 2. Background

*Aim: to gather contextual information on their role, qualifications and professional background.*

- Current Role
- Professional background

## 3. Setting overview

*Aim: to gather detail on the setting context to inform the rest of the interview. [Note: this can be brief because some detail will be known from screening information / quality visit].*

- Overview of setting
  - Type of setting
  - Size / facilities
  - Age range catered for
  - Staff number / qualification levels
  - Opening hours / session lengths

- Typical day overview
- Overview of local area
  - Socio-economic profile of area
  - Population setting caters for
    - EYPP levels
    - Proportion accessing funded 2 year old provision

## 4. Teaching and learning

*Aim: to explore in depth the settings approach to teaching and learning and the factors underpinning good practice from their perspective.*

- Planning for the delivery of the teaching and learning requirements of the EYFS statutory framework
  - Current approach
  - How observation and assessment are used to inform planning
  - Staff time for preparation
  - Barriers to effective curriculum planning
  - What works
- Monitoring and tracking children's progress
  - Current approach
  - Strategies for addressing concerns
  - Use of outcomes to inform planning
  - Barriers to effective monitoring
  - What works
- Factors underpinning high quality teaching and learning
  - Social and emotional development
  - Self- regulation
  - Learning and critical thinking
- Probe for role of:
  - Adult / child interactions
  - Resources / facilities
  - Planning
  - Staffing
  - Training / CPD
  - Role of parents
- Sustaining high quality teaching and learning
  - For different age groups
  - For part-time and full-time places
  - For children at different stages of development

## 5. Leadership and management

*Aim: to explore their views on what management structures facilitate and help sustain good practice. To explore how their setting monitors the quality of their provision and what strategies they have in place for continuous quality improvement.*

- Overview of management structure
  - Views on what works / does not work
  - Facilitators / barriers to effective management structure

- Continuous quality improvement
  - Current approach to monitoring and evaluating quality
  - Strategies for continuous quality improvement
  - Facilitators / barriers to quality improvement
- Sources of support / guidance – views on value
  - Ofsted
  - Local authority
  - Advisory Body/ Committee
  - Professional bodies
  - Partner agencies
  - Other nurseries / schools
  - Others

## 6. Staffing

*Aim: to explore their views and experiences of recruiting staff – what they look for and how easy / difficult it is to recruit. To gather their views on staff retention – what the challenges are and what strategies they have to retain staff. To explore in depth their approach to work force development and CPD.*

- Staff recruitment and retention
  - Views and experiences of staff recruitment
    - Qualifications sought & views on the value of these
    - What qualities they look for in staff when recruiting
    - Ease / difficulty of recruiting suitable staff
  - Levels of staff retention
    - Opportunities for career progression
    - Staff turnover rate last 12 month
    - Barriers / facilitators to staff retention
  - Views on qualification mix within setting
    - Within each session
    - Across age groups
- Work force development / CPD
  - Approach to staff CPD
  - Views on value of CPD / effectiveness
  - Barriers / facilitators to effective CPD
  - How effectiveness / quality of CPD is judged
- Staff supervision
  - Approach to supervision / performance management
  - Views on effective approaches

## 7. Home/school relationships and partnerships

*Aim: to understand their approach to communicating with parents about all aspects of their role, with particular emphasis on how they engage parents with their child's progress & what they do to foster a positive home-learning environment.*

- Approach to communication with parents
  - Format / frequency
  - Role of child's key worker in sharing information with parents
  - Views on what is effective / not effective
  - Barriers to communication

- Approach to sharing information with parents on child development / progress
  - Format / frequency
  - Views on what is effective / not effective
  - Barriers to sharing information on progress
  - Two year-old integrated review
- Home learning environment
  - How this is fostered/ encouraged?
  - Views on what is effective / not effective
  - Barriers to fostering home learning environment

## 8. Within setting and school transition

*Aim: to understand their approach to within setting and school transition – views on effective strategies for smooth transition.*

- Within setting transitions
  - Approach to transition
  - What works / doesn't work
- 
- School transition
  - Approach to transition
  - What works / doesn't work
  - Level of partnership working

## 9. Final reflections

*Aim: to gather their final reflections on the 'key ingredients' that sustain high quality provision in their setting. To gather their recommendations for ways to embed high quality provision across the Early Years sector.*

- Key features of their provision that underpin and sustain quality
- Views on how to embed high quality provision across the sector
- Any final thoughts / reflections

*Thank and close*

# Parent topic guide

## Study of Early Education and Development: Best Practice Case Studies

### Parent Topic Guide

#### Aim of the interviews (for researcher)

To understand in depth what underpins high quality practice, and how this is articulated in different Early Years settings and contexts. Interviews with parents aim to explore from their perspective:

- How the setting communicates with them
- How they are kept informed of their child's progress / development
- Nature of any support to develop home learning environment

## 1. Introductions

- Introduce yourself and NatCen
- Introduce the study
- Interview is part of 16 best practice case studies
- Digital recording – check OK, and reassure re: confidentiality
- Data kept securely in accordance with Data Protection Act
- How we'll report findings – anonymity of participants and settings
- Reminder of interview length – 45 minutes
- Right to withdraw during or after the interview has taken place
- All parents receive a £20 high street shopping voucher as a thank you for their time
- Any questions/concerns?

## 2. Background

*Aim: to gather contextual information on their family context, employment and living circumstances [this will confirm and build on information drawn from the screener].*

- Family context
- Current daytime activities
- Overview of setting use
  - Length of time child/ren been attending the setting
  - Pattern and number of hours used e.g. all day, mornings only, 15 hours etc.
  - Whether accessing a two or three-and-four year old funded place
  - Setting fees - affordability
- Reasons for using setting
  - Probe for importance of*
    - Childcare
    - Early education
    - Other

### 3. Parent views of quality

*Aim: to explore how parents assess the quality of their setting (including the value placed on staff qualifications etc.) and what features they value and why.*

- How they make a judgement on the quality of their setting
  - Probe for relative importance of*
    - Staff qualifications
      - Importance of graduates / other qualifications
    - Physical / social / learning environment
    - Ofsted inspection rating
    - Reputation
    - Staff: child ratios

### 4. Communication with the setting

*Aim: to understand how parents experience communicating with the setting, including views on most effective approaches.*

- Approach setting has to communicating with parents
  - Format
  - Frequency
  - Type of information provided
    - Awareness of how their child spends their time at the setting
    - Value / usefulness of this information
  - Views on effective / less effective ways to communicate with parents
- Experience of initiating communication with setting
  - Purpose & who they aimed to speak to e.g. manager / key worker etc.
  - Ease / difficulty of communication
  - Satisfaction with setting response
  - How comfortable they feel communicating / discussing issues with the setting
  - Successes/ challenges/ barriers

### 5. Home learning environment & child development

*Aim: to understand how their setting keeps them informed of their child's development / progress, including experiences of the two-year-old integrated review. To explore the extent to which they are aware of their child's current learning goals and how far the setting influences the home learning environment.*

- Extent setting shares information on their child's development / progress
  - Format - views of / usefulness
  - Frequency – views on
  - Views on best ways to share this information
  - Understanding of their child's learning goals
  - Role of child's key person in sharing information with parents
- Whether setting has influenced home learning environment
  - Extent setting has suggested ways they could support their child at home
  - Ways e.g. activity suggestions, equipment, recommendations
  - Acceptability of setting influencing home learning environment
    - Whether acted on suggestions – why/why not

- Usefulness of suggestions
  - Views on effective ways settings could support home environment
- Two-year-old integrated review (if applicable)
  - Experience of review
    - Positives
    - Negatives
  - Role of setting, including key person
  - Satisfaction with outcomes

## 6. Within setting and school transition

*Aim: to understand from a parent perspective, how the settings manage transitions between different parts of the setting. [Note: not all parents will have had experience of transition to school so only discuss where parent has had recent experience at the setting with an older child].*

- Into setting [for parents with recent experience]
  - Experience of transition into setting
    - What was involved
  - Ease / difficulty of transition for their child
    - Any issues / difficulties & how resolved
    - Satisfaction with process
  - What works / doesn't work
- Within setting transitions
  - Experience of transitions over time
    - Infant to toddler
    - Toddler to pre-school
  - Ease / difficulty of transition for their child
  - What works / doesn't work
- School transition (if relevant)
  - Experience of school transition (with older children)
  - What works / doesn't work
  - Ease / difficulty of transition for their child
  - Role of setting in supporting transition

## 7. Perceived impacts

*Aim: to gather parent views on what impacts attending the setting has had on their child. To gather their reflections on what elements of the provision have had the greatest impact.*

- Views on how attending the setting had impacted on their child's:
  - Behaviour
  - Social development
  - Learning
- Views on features of setting that have led to impacts (identified above)  
*Probe for relative importance of:*
  - Adult / child interactions
  - Resources / facilities
  - Curriculum / activities

- Staffing / ratios
  - Setting relationships with parents
  - Other
  - Views on how these factors led to impacts
  - What impacts are most important
- Any final thoughts / reflections

*Thank and close*



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