

Good practice in early education

Introduction and background

At present, all three- and four-year-olds in England are currently 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). The Government has recently expanded this entitlement to benefit two-year-olds living in lower income households in England. From September 2014 two-year-old children in the 40 per cent most disadvantaged households in England were eligible for 15 hours of funded provision across a wide range of provider types. 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 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 per cent of eligible children received their funded provision in settings rated good or outstanding by Ofsted.

The Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) is a major study exploring early years provision and how it can improve outcomes for children and their families. It is undertaken by NatCen Social Research, the University of Oxford, 4Children and Frontier Economics. It follows around 6,000 children across England from the age of two, through their first few years of early education. This report is one of the SEED series. It explores: how early years settings sustain high quality teaching and learning; the features of management and leadership which lead to high quality provision; how effective relationships are maintained with parents; and how providers support home learning. The report is based on 16 case studies which were carried out in a range of early years settings, all of which had been assessed as 'good' or 'excellent' by 4Children as part of the wider SEED project. The studies undertaken included face-to-face interviews with managers and staff along with telephone interviews with parents and Local Authority staff.

Key points

Learning and development

- The study found that good practice in relation to curriculum planning involved: tailoring learning to individual needs, being flexible and responsive to the needs and interests of children; use of on-going assessment to inform planning; being grounded in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework; and differentiating learning for age and stage of development.
- Staff at early years settings considered that curriculum planning was strengthened by consultation and input from staff at all levels and regular evaluation through observation and staff discussion. This meant that staff understood the aims and objectives of the curriculum and were clear about their roles.
- 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. Notable features of good assessment practice included: regular communication between staff about the findings of assessment; high staff-child ratios which made it possible to carry out sufficient 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 reflect a child's stage of development or level of progress. 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.
- A range of strategies were identified as effective in supporting learning and development. These included: staff modelling prosocial behaviour; small group activities that supported children to work together; a consistent approach to behaviour management and using snacks and mealtimes as an opportunity to foster prosocial behaviour.
- Warm and positive relationships between staff and children as well as consistency and routine and strong relationships with parents were all viewed as features of good practice. Encouraging children to do things for themselves, involving them in decision making and supporting them to find their own solutions to conflicts were seen as encouraging 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, effective strategies included taking a child-led approach, ensuring access to a wide range of age appropriate resources and use of visual aids. The provision of an environment with age appropriate furniture and equipment was also considered important.

Supporting transition

- The study identified a number of features of good practice to support transitions between settings. These included home visits, gathering information from parents about the child and working with other settings. Visits to the new settings with increasing time at the new setting was also seen as effective, as were routine and consistency. Setting staff 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.

Management and leadership

- 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 between staff underpinned many other aspects of good practice. In addition to formal information sharing including regular staff meetings, staff also valued regular informal communication such as Facebook pages, information boards and informal catch-ups.
- Observations of early years practice by both senior managers and 'peer to peer' were seen as an effective evaluation tool. Audits of children's progress records and the learning environment were also used, as well as internal self-evaluation reflection sheets and internal inspections. Open plan environments were particularly highlighted as a feature that helped this informal communication.
- Local Authorities were felt to play an important role in supporting good practice 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. They also offered 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.
- In the light of funding cuts experienced by some Local Authorities, staff reflected that partnership working between settings was becoming increasingly important. Good practice included visits and information sharing with other settings as well as 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 was viewed as challenging largely because pay levels across the sector were felt to be low.
- 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. Consideration was given to the mix of staff within settings to ensure that less experienced staff were supported by more experienced colleagues.
- Settings looked for soft skills such as warmth, empathy, and good communication skills.
- Since settings valued staff experience and recruitment was felt to be challenging, staff retention was a priority. Features of good practice for 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, although these were inevitably more limited in small settings.
- High quality settings prioritised CPD to maximize up to date professional practice. Internal training delivered by senior practitioners was viewed as a cost effective approach to CPD, as were observations by senior staff or peers. To maximise cost effectiveness, external training was disseminated to all staff. Online courses were another cost effective method of providing CPD.

Engaging with parents and home learning

- To support effective communication with parents, setting staff highlighted the importance of being non-judgmental and building trust; getting to know parents individually and tailoring the mode of communication to their preferences. Effective communication between staff meant 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.
- Settings encouraged two-way communication through parent feedback books; and provided opportunities for parents to volunteer.
- In addition to parents' evenings and progress records, some settings were using online assessment and monitoring systems which could be shared with parents. Parents valued the easy access and immediacy of feedback provided by such approaches. Some were less positive, preferring face-to-face feedback about their child.
- A range of strategies were used by settings to promote home learning. Examples included: making suggestions through emails and newsletters as to how parents could incorporate learning into daily life; providing activity sheets focused on key aspects of learning such as phonics; inviting parents into classes; and encouraging regular reading at home by lending books.
- Other features of good practice which were identified included: giving careful consideration to the frequency of home learning suggestions so that parents found it manageable; 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.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/good-practice-in-early-education>