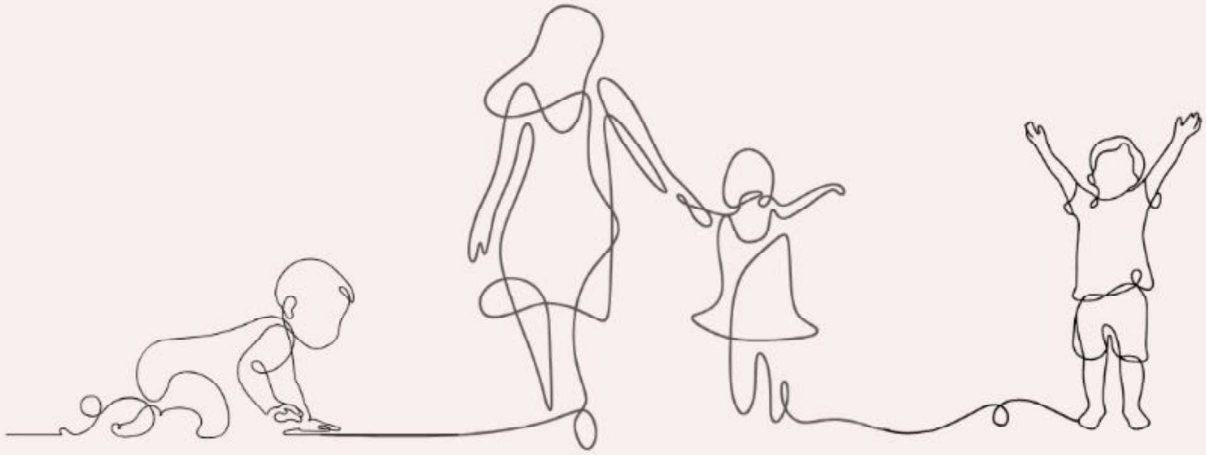
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Quality Matters

in early childhood education and care

Edited by Viki Veale, Rod ParkerRees,
Eva Mikuska and Charlotte Jones

TACTYC

babytoddlertwoyearoldpreschoolernurseryreceptionclasschild

inclusiondevelopmentexplorationbelongingpedagogyvoice

educatorsfamilycommunitypolicyprofession

Quality Matters

TACTYC

2026



Quality Matters

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Quality Matters: An Introduction

Viki Veale: Chair of TACTYC

Understanding Early Childhood Education and Care in England

England has a complex landscape of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Payler, Georgeson and Wickett (2013:257) argued that the sector developed through a combination of 'philanthropy, pluralism, propagation and pragmatism' rather than as the result of a coherent national strategy to support early learning and development. In 2026, it seems that little has changed. Indeed, as Lloyd (2014) asserted, the benefits of ECEC for children still often appear to be secondary to the economic necessity of supporting parental employment through affordable childcare in policy level discussions.

The ECEC sector in England includes private, voluntary, independent and state-run home-based childcare, day care, play groups, nurseries, and Reception classes. Settings offering care for more than 2-hours a day must be registered with the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and skills (Ofsted), who inspect and regulate provision. Eligible working families receive a fixed amount of government funding which can be used to pay for childcare in any

Ofsted registered setting. However, the only areas of ECEC that continue to be fully funded are Reception classes and maintained nurseries, which are also legally constituted as schools (Paull and Popov, 2019).

Decades of austerity has seen increased marketization of ECEC. Within this climate, many settings face ongoing financial strain and issues with recruitment and retention (House of Commons Education Committee, 2023). Regional inequality persists and, as Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Albäck (2021) point out, rather than improving access to ECEC, policies focusing on working parents seem to have disproportionately affected those who are already the most disadvantaged.

Why quality matters

Over the last fifty years, successive studies have shown that high quality ECEC can have a profound and lasting impact on children's long term outcomes (Oppenheim and Archer, 2021; Nutbrown, 2012; Sylva, et al 2004; Wedge and Prosser, 1973; Pringle, Butler and Davie, 1966 to name but a few). Despite the 'hostile environment' (Bradbury, Hoskins and Fogarty, 2023:171) in which they operate, graduate led maintained nurseries have been found to have an especially profound impact on learning and development. This impact is reflected in the fact that with 97% of maintained Nurseries in England have been graded as good or outstanding by Ofsted (2025). Often located within areas of

deprivation, these nurseries are community hubs offering vital support to children and families, particularly those with additional needs.

Who defines quality?

The quality of ECE in England is officially defined by the Department for Education who set mandatory standards for learning and development, premises, safeguarding and staff ratios (DfE, 2025a and 2025b). These standards are inspected and regulated by Ofsted. Although often described as an independent inspectorate, Ofsted is a non-ministerial government department which reports directly to parliament. In recent years, the boundaries of Ofsted's role have become increasingly blurred (Tian, 2024). Rather than inspecting and reporting on the quality of provision, the rigidity of the inspection process increasingly defines how quality is understood.

Criticisms of how the quality of ECEC is defined at policy level in England include the disproportionate prioritisation of academic outcomes and over emphasis on school readiness in the inspection process at the expense of building a holistic picture of development within the setting (Castro-Kemp and Kemp, 2025). Elsewhere, colleagues have pointed out that policy level definitions of quality are based on limited engagement with research evidence and incomplete understandings of the characteristics of effective learning and principles that underpin practice and pedagogy with young children (Early Education, 2022). The

challenge is, that when external notions of quality are at odds with the needs and interests of young children, professional confidence is eroded and development impeded (Sims and Waniganayake, 2015).

Re-defining quality

Wider literature exploring the subject of quality usually refers to two elements: structural quality, or systems, and process quality or relationships (OECD, 2018). We align with the Early Years Coalition (2025) in thinking that it is quality as it is experienced by the child that should be our prime concern. We also concur that quality is not a destination but a journey and that if we are to ensure the best possible quality of education and care for babies and young children, we must work collaboratively with parents, practitioners and policy makers to develop a shared vision.

Towards a shared vision of quality

This document seeks to move us closer towards a shared vision of quality and how it is developed. Combining insights from practice and research, this text uses the structural element of ratios as an organising feature.

In **Chapter 1**, Eva Mikuska, Nikki Fairchild and Sasha Tregenza begin the conversation by delving deeper into the literature around quality. Exploring how quality is perceived by parents, policy makers, educators

and, most importantly, by children, they conclude that quality is socially, culturally, and contextually constructed. Rather than being reduced to measurable indicators or standardised expectations, they contend that, rather than focusing only on measurable indicators or standardised expectations, a more holistic and inclusive understanding must be reached.

In **Chapter 2**, Amanda Norman, Clair James and Sarah Thomas explore the foundations of quality in home-based education and care. With numbers of childminders in England continuing to decline, Norman, James and Thomas unpick how alloparenting offers an invaluable high quality early learning experience for young children, and what can be done to support those working in this capacity.

In **Chapter 3**, Mona Sakr, Sara Bonetti and Kayla Hughes draw on their recent study 'Achieving high-quality provision in English baby rooms: looking ahead to the future'(Sakr, Bonetti and Halls, 2026) to explore what quality looks like and how it can be developed in baby rooms. They argue that to develop the quality of provision for babies, action is needed at multiple levels.

In **Chapter 4**, Charlotte Jones and Rageena Tahir, consider how structural issues impact process quality when working with babies over the age of one and toddlers. Jones and Tahir share case studies illustrating how settings have moved beyond compliance to develop

the quality of their provision and the experience that children enjoy there.

In **Chapter 5**, Elizabeth Carruthers, Maulfry Worthington, Susan Rogers and Susan Wilcox reflect on how quality is experienced by three-and four-year-olds in England, urging educators to remain responsive to children's needs rather than focusing on school readiness.

In **Chapter 6**, Eleanor Milligan, Janet Morris, Lorna Williams, Gemma-Claire Bagnall, Sally Teare, Becki Jennings and Caroline Lightfoot consider the structural and process elements that support transition to school, concluding that ultimately, children's experiences are shaped by the quality of relationships and interactions in their settings and the extent to which these interactions are used to inform pedagogical decision-making.

In recognition that England is an outlier in defining ECEC as birth to five rather than birth to seven, in **Chapter 7**, Sue Allingham, Jan Dubiel, Julie Fisher, Jo Gray, Hayley Peacock and Hannah Foster argue that while adult led learning is necessary at a developmentally appropriate point, direct teaching alone does not represent a high quality learning experience. Drawing on case studies where head teachers have sustained play based learning and continuous provision in KS1, they argue that quality is sustained in KS1 through developmentally appropriate play-based-practice.

Feel free to dip in and out of this text, focusing on the year group you work with day to day, or to read the whole text and reflect on what lessons you can learn before joining me again in the final chapter.

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Chapter 1: Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education and Care

Eva Mikuska, Nikki Fairchild and Sasha Tregenza

Introduction and background literature

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has gained increasing prominence in research, policy, and professional debates due to growing recognition of the significance of children's early experiences for later learning, wellbeing, and developmental outcomes. In England, discussions surrounding ECEC have increasingly focused on the importance of quality, given its potential to shape children's educational experiences and longer-term life opportunities.

Quality has been conceptualised in multiple ways, reflecting differing priorities and theoretical underpinnings. For example, Urban et al. (2012) emphasise structural aspects of quality, including workforce qualifications and policy frameworks, while Oppenheim and Archer (2021) highlight the importance of pedagogical practice and children's experiences in educational settings. Similarly, Dahlberg et al. (2013) challenge universal definitions of quality, arguing that quality should be understood as socially and culturally constructed. More recently, Mikuska and Fairchild (2026) and Rademacher et al. (2025) have conceptualised quality through interconnected dimensions, including

the EYFS (DfE, 2025) framework, physical and material environments, pedagogical approaches, policy directions, and children's outcomes and achievements. This chapter draws together and builds on previous research to unpick the literature on perspectives of quality from government, educators, parents, and children; therefore, it explores why quality matters in ECEC and argues for more holistic, contextual, and child-inclusive understandings of quality.

Although quality remains difficult to define, research consistently suggests that high-quality ECEC can have sustained and lasting positive impacts for young children (Early Education, 2025). However, Fairchild and Mikuska (2024) argue that quality is a contested concept within research, policy, and wider debates, due to the plurality of philosophical, disciplinary, and theoretical perspectives that shape its meaning. These understandings are frequently influenced by policymakers, stakeholders, and service users and are situated within broader political and economic agendas. In particular, contemporary policy discourses increasingly frame quality through human capital approaches that prioritise pedagogy, measurable outcomes, and future economic productivity (Mikuska et al., 2025). Despite increasing scholarly attention to quality, research foregrounding young children's perspectives, where children's voices are included, remains comparatively limited. Where children's voices are heard they are commonly positioned as agentic, capable, and active social beings

whose perspectives can meaningfully contribute to understandings of quality in ECEC (Campbell-Barr, 2019).

Recognising aspects of high-quality ECEC can be further characterised into process quality (day to day experiences and interactions) and structural quality (measurable aspects) (Dahlberg et al., 2013). To identify the interchangeable components of quality ECEC (Wood, 2019), the valuable knowledge and lived experiences of educators contributing towards the working practices involved in determining a high-quality early learning environment must be considered (Tregenza and Campbell-Barr, 2023; Early Education, 2025).

How contemporary quality discourses shape professional identity

Quality in English ECEC continues to be shaped by changing political, economic, and social priorities. While quality has traditionally been associated with staff qualifications, pedagogical approaches, and children's developmental outcomes, contemporary ECEC increasingly reflects neoliberal understandings of quality through standardised curriculum expectations, accountability, and assessment practices (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Such approaches prioritise measurable developmental outcomes and position children's early learning as predictive of future educational success.

In England, one of the most pressing contemporary concerns is the tension between expanding ECEC provision and maintaining quality, particularly in the context of an ongoing workforce crisis. Recruitment and retention difficulties, low pay, staff shortages, increased workloads, and the continued pressure of inspection regimes have raised concerns regarding educators' wellbeing and the sustainability of high-quality provision (Fairchild and Mikuska, 2021). These developments have shaped wider quality discourses, often framed through distinctions between structural quality, including qualifications, ratios, and environments, and process quality, relating to children's experiences, relationships, and pedagogical interactions (Paananen, 2020). However, contemporary conceptualisations of quality have been critiqued for privileging measurable outcomes while obscuring broader political and social inequalities and positioning ECEC as a mechanism for social mobility and a solution to structural poverty (Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2016). Similarly, neoliberal discourses may promote technocratic understandings of pedagogy, whereby educational success is narrowly linked to measurable progress and standardised expectations (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021).

Quality also remains socially constructed and shaped by policy, research, and stakeholder perspectives (Bonetti and Brown, 2018). This raises important questions concerning whose understandings of quality are prioritised. For example, Tembo and Bateson (2024)

problematise the experiences of Global Majority practitioners and children, arguing that racism remains embedded within everyday ECEC experiences and may be overlooked within dominant quality frameworks.

The relationship between quality and professional identity has become increasingly important in contemporary debates. Mikuska and Fairchild (2026) argue that educators' professional identities are shaped through the interaction of qualifications, workplace expectations, policy demands, and professional status. Similarly, Campbell-Barr et al. (2026) contend that fragmented qualification pathways and inconsistent professional recognition continue to challenge workforce professionalism and perceptions of quality. Consequently, sustaining high-quality ECEC requires not only clear qualification frameworks and professional learning opportunities, but also greater recognition of educators' expertise, status, and the relational complexity of early years practice.

Government perspective of quality

Government understandings of quality ECEC are commonly framed through policy mechanisms, accountability, and measurable outcomes associated with children's development and school readiness. In England, quality is primarily operationalised through the statutory requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework,

which establishes expectations relating to learning, development, safeguarding, and curriculum provision (Department for Education, 2025). Through this framework, quality is frequently associated with ensuring children are equipped with the foundational knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for future educational success.

Alongside curriculum expectations, government perspectives of quality are reinforced through inspection and accountability systems. Inspection frameworks position quality in relation to leadership, teaching and learning, educator interactions, and children's progress, reflecting broader policy priorities surrounding standards and effectiveness. Such approaches align with neoliberal understandings of quality, where measurable outcomes, assessment, and evidence of impact become central indicators of successful provision (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021).

However, government conceptualisations of quality have been increasingly critiqued for privileging school readiness and future economic productivity over relational, contextual, and child-centred understandings of early childhood experiences (Campbell-Barr, 2019; Fairchild and Mikuska, 2024). Critics argue that framing quality through accountability and developmental outcomes may narrow pedagogical practice and overlook the complexity of children's lived experiences, play, and wellbeing. In their response to the UK Parliament Education Committee call for evidence, Fairchild and Mikuska (2025) further

contend that quality cannot be reduced to inspection outcomes, standardised developmental expectations, or accountability metrics alone. Instead, they argue for broader conceptualisations of quality that foreground workforce wellbeing, relational pedagogy, children's everyday experiences, and equitable access to provision. Such perspectives highlight the importance of recognising quality as relational and contextually situated rather than solely measurable through policy-driven indicators. Consequently, tensions remain between government-led understandings of quality and perspectives that emphasise flexibility, relationships, and responsiveness within ECEC settings.

Educators' perspectives of quality ECEC

The perspectives of Educators as to what the features of a high-quality curriculum should include signal the uniqueness of the early years framework in comparison to all other stages of education (Campbell-Barr et al., 2023). Educators acknowledge the complexities involved in establishing a high-quality learning environment, noting the entanglement of three key features required to establish a quality framework. For example, (Campbell-Barr et al. 2023) identify three interconnected features that educators associate with a high-quality curriculum, an *emergent curriculum,* which responds to children's interests, needs, and developmental stages; a *contextual curriculum,*

which recognises children's diverse ecological and cultural backgrounds; and an *expressive curriculum*, which values children's autonomy and participation in shaping practice and provision.

Recent empirical research by Mikuska et al. (2025) further strengthens these understandings by foregrounding educators' lived perspectives of quality in ECEC. Their findings indicate that educators frequently conceptualise quality through everyday pedagogical interactions, emotionally responsive relationships, and the ability to remain adaptable to the needs of children and families. Rather than viewing quality solely through measurable outcomes or accountability frameworks, educators highlighted the importance of professional judgement, children's wellbeing, and creating environments in which children feel secure, valued, and supported to flourish. The following extract from an interview with a nursery practitioner, conducted as part of the project by Mikuska et al. (2025) illustrates this.

> ***The policies are there to guide you, to tell you a certain amount of what to do, but they do not tell you about the everyday moments with children. You know, when a child cried today, or when a child smiled today, or that I picked the child up, comforted them for a couple of minutes, and they were fine. That kind of care cannot really be measured. The attachment and care I give are qualities that you***

cannot easily measure. I think the government needs to recognise and evaluate who is 'good' based on how they are with children (Nursery Practitioner)

Educators further position quality as a collaborative process involving children, families, communities, and practitioners, whereby multiple forms of knowledge and expertise contribute to shaping meaningful learning experiences (Campbell-Barr et al., 2023). Similarly, Campbell-Barr and Tregenza (2023) argue that high-quality ECEC requires educators to continually adapt practice in response to the changing needs of children, families, and wider contexts. Such flexibility reflects the "juggling act" experienced by educators when balancing competing expectations associated with quality provision (Urban et al., 2012). Consequently, quality may be understood less as a fixed endpoint and more as an evolving and negotiated process, shaped through relationships, context, and continually shifting understandings of children's needs (Moss, 2016).

Parents and carers' perspectives of quality

Whilst quality can be explored and perceived from a professional stance, seeking parents' and carers' views of quality ECEC is equally

important. Parents and carers hold in-depth knowledge of their own children and offer an additional perspective of quality through accessing diverse ECEC services. Research suggests that parents and carers often conceptualise quality through relational, emotional, and practical dimensions of provision. For example, Mathers et al. (2014) draw attention to the importance of emotionally responsive practice, noting that educators' sensitivity to children's emotional and developmental needs contributes significantly to parental understandings of quality. Similarly, Callanan, Anderson and Haywood (2017) found that parents and carers frequently associate quality with safety, positive reputation, qualified and experienced educators, and opportunities for meaningful learning experiences. More recent research by Tregenza and Campbell-Barr (2023) further demonstrates that parents and carers often consider both education and care of their young children of equal importance, closely associating the quality of ECEC with establishing trusting and genuine relationships between educators, parents, carers, and children. The following extract is drawn from interview data with parents collected as part of the project by Fairchild and Mikuska (2024), illustrating some parents' understandings of quality.

The first impressions of a nursery are very important. I want to see that there is a warm atmosphere and the staff are welcoming and that my baby will be loved. I think the displays on the walls tells a lot…

there are plenty of drawings and paintings that our children have done themselves. This shows that we encourage children's creativity that is valued. (Parent A)

I would want my child to be loved, well treated, spoken to, and listened to. (Parent B)

It can be argued that parental understandings of quality are not fixed and may shift in response to changing needs, expectations, and social contexts (Wood, 2019). Consequently, quality from parents' and carers' perspectives extends beyond measurable indicators or policy definitions, instead emphasising relationships, communication, security, and adaptability in practice. This highlights the importance of collaborative partnerships between educators, parents, carers, and children in shaping meaningful and contextually responsive understandings of quality within ECEC (Tregenza and Campbell-Barr, 2023).

Birth to five year old children's perspectives of quality

Viewing young children as competent and able to express themselves in a range of ways is a key element of quality provision. However, research foregrounding young children's understandings of quality remains comparatively limited, particularly within English ECEC

settings. Recent scholarship has begun to challenge adult-centric conceptualisations of quality by recognising children's lived experiences and everyday interactions as important indicators of what quality means in practice. In an empirical study conducted across 17 English ECEC settings, Fairchild and Mikuska (2024) employed a research-creation methodology informed by feminist materialist theory and Haraway's *String Figuring* to explore how young children experience quality in their everyday lifeworlds. Rather than conceptualising quality through measurable indicators such as staff qualifications or ratios, the study identified a series of interconnected "knots" through which quality was experienced by children: security, spaces, material objects, autonomy, and relationships with other children. Findings identify that children experienced quality when they felt emotionally secure, had autonomy over their play, and were able to meaningfully engage with spaces, materials, and peers. The research argues that quality is relational, contextual, and materially situated, emerging through everyday interactions between children, educators, objects, and environments.

These findings resonate with wider international literature. For example, Theobald et al. (2025) found that children in an Australian kindergarten conceptualised quality through pedagogy, social relationships, emotional wellbeing, and opportunities for autonomy. Similarly, Macha et al. (2024), in research with young children and

educators in Germany, demonstrate the importance of educators sharing power and listening to children's perspectives to ensure agency and participation are respected. Taken together, this body of research suggests that quality is an international concern shaped through multiple perspectives and experiences (Garvis and Lenz Taguchi, 2024). Importantly, these studies challenge dominant policy-led understandings of quality by foregrounding children's voices and demonstrating that high-quality ECEC extends beyond measurable outcomes to include relational, emotional, and contextual experiences of everyday life.

Conclusion

Quality in ECEC remains a contested and evolving concept, shaped by diverse theoretical, political, practical and professional perspectives. As this chapter has demonstrated, quality cannot be understood through a singular or universal definition; rather, it is socially, culturally, and contextually constructed, reflecting differing priorities across policy, practice, and lived experiences. Government understandings of quality in England continue to be strongly influenced by accountability, school readiness, and measurable developmental outcomes, often framed through policy mechanisms such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2025) and inspection frameworks. Whilst such approaches aim to ensure consistency and effectiveness, critiques suggest that narrow

outcome-focused conceptualisations may overlook the relational, emotional, and contextual dimensions of children's early experiences. Importantly, perspectives from educators, parents and carers, and young children provide more nuanced understandings of quality.

Educators frequently conceptualise quality through responsive pedagogies, professional judgement, adaptability, and trusting relationships, whilst parents and carers often emphasise trust, communication, emotional security, and collaborative partnerships. Emerging research foregrounding children's voices further demonstrates that young children experience quality through relationships, play, emotional safety, and engagement with people, materials, and environments. These perspectives challenge dominant policy narratives by positioning quality as relational, negotiated, and experienced differently across contexts.

This chapter further highlights that sustaining high-quality ECEC is closely connected to workforce professionalism, wellbeing, and professional identity. Consequently, quality should not be reduced to measurable indicators or standardised expectations alone. Instead, developing and sustaining high-quality ECEC requires more holistic and inclusive understandings that recognise the complexity of children's lives, value educators' expertise, and meaningfully include the voices of children and families. Ultimately, quality matters because children's

early experiences matter, and these experiences shape not only immediate wellbeing, but also children's sense of belonging, participation, and future opportunities.

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Chapter 2: Foundations of Quality: Home-Based Education and care

Amanda Norman, Clair James and Sarah Thomas

Introduction

This chapter introduces and explores the term 'professional alloparenting' with reference to the foundations of quality when considering home-based education and care (HBEC). Within this chapter we have made specific reference to childminding as a valuable service that invites reflective thinking about foundations of quality within home-based care and the opportunity it affords within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) contexts. Alongside Amanda Norman and Clair James, Sarah Thomas has also shared her experiences as a childminder. Currently studying for a degree at the University of Winchester Sarah continues to work part time as a childminder, contributing a rich perspective on her experiences during the course of 40 years.

Childminding Alloparenting: Childminders and Home-Based Care

The term Alloparenting refers to the care of children by individuals other than their biological parents. This may also include the sharing of time, energy and resources to support infants and young children

(Kluger, 2011). In the contemporary early childhood context in England, professional alloparenting provides a useful framework for understanding the diverse networks of care that surround young children, particularly within high-quality HBEC settings such as those offered by childminders.

The rationale to introduce the term alloparenting is significant when considering HBEC, specifically childminders where the space often mirrors features of the family home. This also includes the emotional environment of intimacy and care that is offered in a domestic space, with small ratios, a slower pedagogy of care and an opportunity to enhance attachment and bond relationships between the child and carer. Mann and Walsh (2026) argue that the home environment does this in a way that is unique to other types of ECEC provision in that children may stay with the same childminder for many years rather than changing carer on an annual basis, as they would in many other settings. Whilst care is at the heart of the role it should also be recognised as a high quality and professional career, with ongoing opportunities for professional development.

Foundations of Quality: Home-Based Education and Care

I have worked in HBEC for over 40 years. I trained as a children's nanny in 1984, gaining a City and Guilds in Home Management and Family

Care, before becoming a registered childminder in 1990. Throughout my career I have always sought opportunities for training and professional development, completing my NVQ in Early Years Childhood Education in 2006 and becoming one of the first childminders in my area to gain network accreditation. During that time, I have witnessed significant changes in legislation, policy and professional expectations within the early years sector. I believe that high-quality HBEC is about providing a comfortable, secure and safe home-from-home environment where children feel relaxed, valued and that they genuinely belong. Whilst regulations, inspections and frameworks have changed over the years, my understanding of quality has remained largely the same. Children need secure relationships, consistency, emotional security and adults who know them well. HBEC offers the opportunity to provide this through small group care, continuity and strong partnerships with families

(Sarah Thomas, Childminder, 2026).

To define an understanding of 'quality' in HBEC is challenging; the word itself has a conventional meaning and is widely used in the sector, but what does it actually mean? In short, 'quality' is a subjective social construct. Informed by Tayler et als (2013) work, this may be interpreted in two distinct ways. 'Quality' can be determined by the practitioner's research based or philosophically informed pedagogy

leading to their ‘quality’ practice. This can be supported by membership of associations such as Coram PACEY (*Coram PACEY,* 2026: online), a network dedicated to supporting childminders. This type of ‘quality’ can be set in contrast with parental or familial emotionally led expectations. Both viewpoints support the argument that not only is ‘quality’ a construct, but it is also infused with the values of the individual. For some families, HBEC provision might be deemed a high ‘quality’ provision due to the activities and learning that are on offer, for others it might be the type and variety of community groups the childminder visits with the children. For the childminder - a professional educator and carer - the ‘quality’ of education and care they provide will be scrutinised by Ofsted. Proof will be required that the educational programmes of the early years foundation stage (EYFS) are adhered to, resulting in the meeting of early learning goals within the EYFS (Department for Education [DfE], 2025).

Yet, as in all forms of ECEC, there is also ‘quality’ to be found in HBEC in the immeasurable. That is to say the gestures, the vocal interactions, the unseen emotional labour of managing the emotions and feelings of the children and their relationships, and of course, the immeasurable professional love shown by the home-based practitioner to the child, their family and their unique situation (Steiner, 1998; Taggart, 2011; Tayler et al, 2013; Page, 2018). Whilst this is the aim of institutionalised ECEC, it would be true to state that the relationality of HBEC, chosen

perhaps for this intimacy over institutionalised settings, has an advantage due to the nature of both its small size and the flexibility the childminder has. The 'quality' of care in a nursery setting, is more likely to be judged by Ofsted on its 'quality' as a material service, opening hours, staff turnover, timetables of learning opportunities and so on. This means that the judgement of 'quality' sits firmly in the realm of institutionalised policy, procedure and regulatory arrangements with a sense of the contractual 'quality' rather than 'quality' relational aspects. For this reason, to deliberately use another socially constructed term, HBEC can be seen as 'artisan' care, due to its small, human-scale ratios, its familial atmosphere and consequently its ability to be truly relational and attentive to the education and the care it provides for the whole child and their family in a flexible way (*Human Scale Education*, 2024). The flexibility of HBEC is evidenced in the temporal openness that it naturally enjoys along with an authentically child-led approach - in the true meaning of the phrase.

To extend the comparison of both group based ECEC and HBEC, 'quality' is aimed for in both models, however, it could be argued that childminder's may far greater autonomy than nursery workers. Choices and decisions can be reflected upon and changed more easily in the home-based situation, this could be said to add to the job satisfaction of the childminder, as an educationalist with autonomy is a happy educationalist (Pink, 2009). However, it would be remiss not to

mention the potential for practitioner isolation, and to be reminded of the African Proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child'. Often the childminder may find themselves in a position similar to that of a parent rather than a nursey worker employed in group care settings. In group based ECEC, this physical isolation simply wouldn't happen as the presence of co-workers ensures frequent professional and social interactions throughout the working day. The following case study, written by Clair James, in her previous role as a childminder outlines how lone working culminated in the issues around feelings of isolation. It also illustrates how by seeking out 'her village' she was able to address and change a feeling of solitude into one of being part of a local community.

As a childminder in a rural village on the outskirts of Bath in the UK, I took to childminding after the birth of my first child. Not wanting to return to work and leave him in his early years, I needed to replace the lost wage of my pre-pregnancy career. Following all the required registration procedures, I opened my family home in the village as a place of learning and play. In this semi-rural location, services such as the mobile library that visited once a month, and the weekly church coffee morning were the only community groups or spaces that were available to me and they became invaluable spaces for my own sense of wellbeing, as well as introducing the children in my care to regular outings into the community. The flexibility was huge, we all enjoyed

picnics, countryside walks, play parks and so on, and I soon became a recognisable figure in the village with a waiting list of local families interested in HBEC places with me. However, the early starts and late finishes left me isolated for long hours of each day with no other adult company, in a sense, it was akin to a parenting experience as they navigate the care of their children. In order to change this, I looked to my professional association, then the National Childminder's Association, and found little local or practical support. So, I founded a childminder group in my local church hall and advertised across Bath and its surrounds. The result was several childminders joined me, with all their children, and soon there grew a supportive community of practice with a social identity emerging as professional alloparents. It was the flexibility and autonomy of the profession that enabled this, and as a result it meant the 'quality' of my relational provision grew. Children met other children in the same situation as them, friendships formed as they did for the childminders themselves. It was hoped that issues inherent to the profession would be discussed, but the need to undertake the work of the 'quality' home-based educator, meant that such discussions were distracted at best! For that to happen, we, the childminders, went on to form a separate evening group that could be used to support each other in inspections, family issues and other life events. This discussion or support group then led to being able to cover each other in times of sickness, creating a sense of collegiality and

allowing the sick childminder to be 'sick in peace' knowing that their children's families were not disrupted (Clair James, 2026).

This case study illustrates that autonomy is valued as an attribute of the choice to offer HBEC and that flexibility to either create or frequent various community groups is a socially necessary addition to HBEC that benefits both the childminder and the children. Such a situation grows the 'quality' of the relational offering, whilst also keeping the childminder abreast of new legislation, able to know first-hand other examples of HBEC to align with or to dismiss. In this way the play group and the discussion group became a practical research project in itself, with the power to change pedagogic choice. And yet one cannot help but notice that in this particular case study, the childminder essentially wanted what institutionalised group care provides including a community of practice, interactions with colleagues professional conversations and support. In this sense we determine that 'quality' can be appreciated in both models of ECEC.

The value of childminding for families

As already highlighted, "it takes a village to raise a child" encapsulates the essence of alloparenting, emphasising the role of a collective community of adults, peers and family in supporting child development (Lancy, 2008). Within this "village," caregivers may include extended family members such as grandparents and siblings, as well as non-kin

such as neighbours, friends and professional carers. Hrdy's (2009) evolutionary perspective underscores the importance of such cooperative care, suggesting that human survival and flourishing have depended on the contributions of multiple caregivers. These insights are highly relevant to contemporary childcare systems, where families often rely on, and often pay for, external support due to work commitments and changing social structures. Although historically this type of provision was used predominantly by poorer working families (Jackson and Jackson 1979), Vincent and Ball (2006) noted a shift in the popularity of HBEC with middle class families. It seems that, as with paid nannies and playgroups, HBEC now aligns not only with changing family needs, but also with beliefs and values about what constitutes high quality provision.

One family in particular demonstrates what quality HBEC can look like in practice. We first met their eldest child when they were only a few days old. Two years later we cared for their second child, supporting the family through pregnancy, the post-natal period and the mother's return to work. In 2016 the family discovered they were expecting a third child and that there was a possibility the baby would be born with Down Syndrome. When their child was six months old, they joined our setting. Over the last ten years we have supported them through many important stages of development, from feeding, crawling and walking through to preschool and school-age care. As they grew older, we

provided wraparound care to support his inclusion with peers and maintain friendships. When difficulties arose around school placement and reduced timetables, we continued to support the family by attending meetings and providing reports based on our knowledge of the child. We worked alongside the parents as they navigated the education system and sought the provision they felt best met their child's needs. The family later experienced parental separation, and we continued to provide flexibility and consistency for both the child and their siblings. Today, the child attends a specialist school and still accesses our setting for wraparound care. Through this continuity they have maintained friendships with children they first met in the early years and continue to be part of a familiar community. Which demonstrates how quality HBEC can support not only a child's development, but also family wellbeing, inclusion and access to education (Sarah Thomas, 2026).

In the UK, high-quality HBEC is often provided by childminders and can be understood as a modern expression of alloparenting. Childminders offer care within their domestic place of residence, often caring for small groups of children of differing in ages, offering an experience similar to that a child with siblings may have in their family home. This environment therefore also closely mirrors the relational dynamics found in extended (conventional and blended) family care, enabling children to form secure attachments with the childminder while

maintaining strong bonds with their parents. As consistent, familiar adults, childminders act as key alloparents, supporting children's emotional, social and cognitive development through everyday routines such as feeding, play and rest. The investment in childminding often results in a sustained relationship with one carer, who is invested in the family relationship. The childminder may employ an assistant, but they will remain the responsible lead and often the person accountable for meeting regulatory quality standards, as well as complying with the standard of care and education outlined by Ofsted and undertaking ongoing training.

Professional development has always been important to me. Keeping up to date with legislation, safeguarding requirements and child development helps practitioners provide the best possible support for children and families. Earlier in my career, local authority training and Children's Centres provided valuable opportunities for learning and networking with other professionals. Whilst the way training is accessed has changed considerably over the years, I still believe that high-quality HBEC requires practitioners to continue learning and reflecting on their practice throughout their careers. This belief ultimately led me to return to education and begin studying for a degree in Education and Childhood Studies. After many years in practice, I wanted to further develop my knowledge, particularly around specific learning difficulties and how best to support children and families facing

additional challenges. Working alongside my partner Richard, who is also Level 3 qualified, has made this possible. Whilst I attend university, Richard continues supporting the children and families within our setting, ensuring continuity of care and maintaining the strong relationships we have built within our close-knit community.

(Sarah Thomas, 2026).

Alongside taking the lead role in the care of children, the childminder will predominantly remain central in the role as alloparent, consistently present during the child's day while at their home. This dual role of lead and carer it affords a unique position that is often segregated within institutionalised group based ECEC.

According to Mann and Walsh (2026) international research has highlighted the connections between quality HBEC and the development of babies and children. Opportunities to listen and respond to children are increased with individualised care contextualized in a homely and intimate environment. By providing a responsive and personalised care a sense of belonging can be nurtured, enhancing the quality of care. HBEC also has the capacity for flexibility, and this includes local community visits and planned outings with the option to be a bit more spontaneous and responsive about when these

occur than might be possible in institutional group based settings and to change the timings of when to go out into the community'

Community engagement has always been at the heart of our practice. Children regularly visit local parks, beaches, forests, libraries, toddler groups and community events. They also become familiar with everyday places such as local shops, doctors' surgeries and dentists. These experiences help children develop confidence within their local environment and build a sense of belonging within the community around them. Rather than learning about the world from a distance, children experience it first-hand as active participants in their community and develop a strong understanding of the geographical area in which they live

(Sarah Thomas, 2026).

Relationships within HBEC

The home-based nature of childminding is particularly significant in fostering secure attachments. Unlike larger institutionalised ECEC, childminders can provide long term continuity of care and stable relationships, which are central to attachment security. This may continue part time when the child attends school (both primary and even on occasion to secondary) as many HBEC also offer afterschool care as part of their registration as a childminder.

Wraparound care can also play a key role in supporting children's transitions into school. Many children in our care have been visiting local school premises through their early years before starting school themselves whilst accompanying older children. They become familiar with teachers, playgrounds and routines, meaning school feels less intimidating and more familiar. Children already know older children within our setting who attend the school, providing additional reassurance and confidence. This has been particularly beneficial for children moving on to secondary school, where familiar faces and established friendships can help ease what can otherwise be a daunting transition

(Sarah Thomas, 2026).

High-quality childminding also reflects the adaptive nature of alloparenting in modern societies. As family structures evolve and the demands of parental employment increases, the role of professional alloparents has become increasingly important. Childminders not only provide practical care but also emotional support, acting as trusted figures who contribute to children's developing identities and wellbeing. Their role challenges the narrow definitions of caregiving by positioning professional practitioners as integral members of children's support systems (Norman, 2024).

The wider network in sustaining high quality Home-based care: Childminders

The professionalisation and the support of childminders are significantly shaped by organisations such as Coram PACEY. They play a crucial role in representing childminders, providing training, resources and advocacy to ensure high standards of practice. Through its work, Coram PACEY helps to position childminders as skilled professionals who are central to the sector of ECEC systems. By offering guidance on safeguarding, child development and business practice, Coram PACEY supports childminders in delivering high-quality, relational care that aligns with alloparenting principles. As a longstanding children's charity, it contributes to this landscape through initiatives focused on improving children's outcomes. Its work reflects a strong commitment to ensuring that all children have access to stable, nurturing relationships. In the context of childminding, Coram PACEY has recently launched 'The Magic of Childminding', a report bringing together real-life experiences, impact and voices of childminders, parents, children and sector experts to highlight the power of childminding across England and Wales. This includes the impact HBEC has on children, families and communities, with a call for Governments in England and Wales to support, develop and invest in the childminding workforce (Coram PACEY, 2026). Research and advocacy therefore highlight the importance of HBEC in providing

continuity and emotional security. Together, this reinforces the value of childminders as key alloparents, ensuring that policy and practice recognise their contribution to children's lives.

Summary

High-quality HBEC in England, particularly through childminders, is characterised by warm, consistent relationships, rich outdoor experiences, flexible and family-like environments, and professional, reflective practice. These features strongly align with alloparenting, as childminders become key, trusted figures contributing to children's development within a broader network of care.

Conclusion

After more than four decades in HBEC, I believe quality is ultimately built on relationships. Professional knowledge, training and regulation all have a major place, but the heart of quality home-based care remains providing children with a safe, secure environment where they feel they belong. By combining professional practice with long-term relationships, flexibility and community involvement, working in partnership with other professionals, home-based childcare can provide children and families with support that extends far beyond the early years.

(Sarah Thomas, 2026).

In conclusion, professional alloparenting, specifically through childminders, offers a powerful framework for understanding the multiple relationships that shape early childhood experiences. By moving beyond a solely dyadic model of attachment, it acknowledges the rich networks of care that support children's development. High-quality HBEC, particularly through childminders, exemplifies this approach by providing nurturing, consistent and relational care within a family-like setting. Supported by organisations such as Coram PACEY, childminders play a vital role as professional alloparents, contributing to the wellbeing, the security and consequently the flourishing of young children in their care.

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Chapter 3: Achieving High-Quality Provision in the Baby Room

Mona Sakr, Sara Bonetti and Kayla Halls

Introduction

In the landscape of early childhood education and care (ECEC), the baby room has a distinctive role to fulfil. It is where children under the age of two typically experience their first relationships beyond the family, where the foundations of learning, development and wellbeing are laid, and where care and education are inseparable.

In England, the policy landscape surrounding provision for the youngest children is changing rapidly. The expansion of the funded entitlement to children from nine months of age, completed as of September 2025, has brought, and continues to bring, many more young babies into nursery provision. This intensifies the urgency of answering the question: what does high-quality provision in the baby room look like, and how can it be achieved?

This chapter draws from our research for the project 'Achieving high-quality provision in the baby rooms of English nurseries', which is funded by the Nuffield Foundation to probe current realities of baby room provision and develop a sector-led vision of high-quality provision

for 0-2 year olds. The chapter brings together global evidence, sector voices and policy analysis to explore how quality can be understood, developed and sustained for babies in England (Sakr, Bonetti, and Halls, 2025a; Sakr, Bonetti, and Halls, 2025b). It situates England within a wider international context, explores what quality looks and feels like in practice, examines the professional learning needed to support it, and concludes with recommendations for nurseries, training bodies and policy-makers to support quality improvement in the baby room.

Policy and Structural Context: England and Beyond

In the March 2023 Budget, the UK Government committed to a significant expansion of the early years entitlement in England. From April 2024, working parents of two-year-olds became eligible for 15 hours per week of funded provision; from September 2024, this extended to children from nine months old; and by September 2025, eligible working parents of all children between nine months and five years old could access 30 hours (term time) of funded childcare (Department for Education, 2025a). This rapid expansion represents a substantial shift in the ECEC landscape and places renewed attention on the systems underpinning provision for babies.

In England, group-based provision for children under two operates under the statutory framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Key structural requirements for this age group include an

adult:child ratio of 1:3 and space requirements of 3.5 m² per child (Department for Education, 2025b). It is important to note that there is no statutory maximum group size; capacity is determined by usable floor space (Department for Education, 2025b). Moreover, qualification requirements apply at a general early years level, without a mandated baby-specific pathway. To work in the baby room and count in the ratios, you need a standard level 3 qualification deemed 'full and relevant' to early years practice by the DfE.

Of these features, our research has drawn particular attention to the absence of a maximum group size in 0-2 provision. As long as ratios are maintained, providers retain discretion over how many babies are accommodated within one room. Comparisons with other parts of the UK and internationally illuminate alternative approaches. In Wales, children under two are typically placed in groups of no more than 12 (Welsh Government, 2022). In Croatia, children under 12 months are in groups of five, and under-twos in groups of 12 or fewer (Schreyer and Oberhuemer, 2024). In the United States, recommended practice suggests groups of no more than eight for under-12-months and 12 for under-threes (Childcare.gov, n.d.). England's lack of a group-size cap stands in contrast to these systems.

Beyond structural regulations, we also see that workforce preparation relating to this age group varies significantly across countries. In

nations such as France and Italy, there are distinct higher-education pathways and specialisations for educators working with 0–3-year-olds, often embedded within a highly professionalised public system (Eurydice, 2024a; Eurydice, 2024b; Picchio and Bove, 2024). In parts of the United States, federally funded Early Head Start programmes require infant–toddler credentials, signalling that work with babies requires dedicated preparation (Head Start, 2024).

In England, by contrast, there is no mandated baby room specialism within mainstream qualifications. Although recent initiatives, such as the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, have brought renewed attention to the critical importance of care and learning in the first years (Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood, 2025), specialisation for under-twos has historically lagged behind. Rockel (2014) describes a similar problem in New Zealand and has repeatedly called for specialised qualifications that specifically address infants and toddlers. As the entitlement expands in England, the structural and professional conditions of baby rooms demand closer scrutiny. Increases in quantity without close attention to quality risks undermining the very developmental potential that early education seeks to unlock.

What Does Quality Look and Feel Like in the Baby Room?

Our research involved sixteen focus groups with a total of 207 baby room educators and nursery managers. Full details of the research design can be accessed in our report on this phase of the project (Sakr, Bonetti and Halls, 2025b). In the focus groups, we probed what high-quality provision looks and feels like in the baby room. Across these rich discussions, a shared understanding emerged: high-quality provision for babies is intensely relational, and the right structural and professional conditions are needed in order for this relational work to unfold.

Four interrelated dimensions consistently surfaced:

1. Secure and attuned relationships
2. A calm and enabling environment
3. Strong partnerships with families
4. Team cultures that sustain reflective practice

Underpinning all four of these facets were structural quality levers, particularly small group sizes and low ratios.

Secure and Attuned Relationships

Echoing previous research in the field, we found that our participants believed that the most important foundation for quality with this age group is the consistency and security of relationships with key adults

(White and Redder, 2015; Elfer, Goldschmied, and Selleck, 2012). Participants repeatedly emphasised attachment-informed practice, continuity of care and familiarity.

> *"When the children come up to you [and you have] that relationship that bond that you've created with that child, they know that they are in safe hands."*
>
> *"For me, [quality is] the attachment to the children, the connectedness to them, knowing your child well, well enough to be able to differentiate the cries."*

Quality was described not as a checklist of activities but as the experience of being known. Babies returning again and again to the same adult builds trust, predictability and emotional security (Longstreth et al, 2016).

Within this vision, care routines were framed as key pedagogical moments:

> *"It's not a conveyor belt space. It's about care and space and it's about time where I can spend that one-to-one. It's a real joyous time rather than being rushed in and rushed out."*

Attuned interactions required time, emotional availability and deep knowledge of individual babies. All of this was enabled by the structural conditions. For example, if the group size was too large, it was much harder to get to know individual babies well or to feel calm and attuned amidst increasing noise levels.

A Calm and Enabling Environment

Participants consistently linked relational quality to the emotional tone of the room. A calm atmosphere was foundational.

> "If you walk in and it's nice and calm, even parents would comment on it… 'I love our calm.'"
>
> *"Walking in and just hearing singing babies, laughing, giggling and just calm."*

Noise, crowding and hurried transitions were seen as undermining babies' sense of security. Thoughtful layout, manageable sensory input and appropriate outdoor access were key. Outdoor environments were valued for offering sensory richness and movement:

> *"I'll happily put them all in a six-seater pram… walk half an hour to the local farm… and then let them take the lead."*
>
> *"It's just to let them explore, let them use their senses and be outside as much as possible."*

Whether it was possible to achieve a calm atmosphere was fundamentally related to the structural lever of group size. Even with 1:3 ratios, large groups create noise and emotional intensity.

> *"It felt very out of control… It's difficult to do anything with any sort of quality when you've got so many even though you've got the right ratio."*

In smaller groups, educators described deeper knowledge of babies and stronger family relationships, resonating with international studies

that link high process quality to small group size (Wysłowska and Slot, 2020; Barros et al, 2016):

> *"You get to know them better… You know what they need, and you know the parents really well."*
>
> *"With less children, we can just slow right down."*

We found that some settings, with many babies, maintain quality by splitting larger cohorts into smaller rotating groups. One group of babies would be indoors, while the others were outdoors, for example. What mattered was the lived experience of smallness and manageability, and the continuity of care between particular educators and babies.

Partnerships with Families

High-quality baby rooms were described by families not only as secure relational spaces for babies, but also as sites of trust, reciprocity and shared responsibility with families. For children under two, the boundary between home and nursery is particularly permeable. Babies move daily between their primary attachment relationships and their early years setting. Quality, therefore, depends on how thoughtfully and respectfully this transition is held (Tebet et al., 2020; White et al, 2020).

Participants emphasised that strong partnerships begin with recognition: recognising parents as experts on their own child, and

recognising the emotional significance of separation in the first years of life. Settling-in processes were described as especially important moments in establishing trust. High-quality provision did not rush this process but created time and space for gradual transitions, open conversations and mutual reassurance.

“Our settling is so long because they get to see each part of the day. They get to meet us, develop that trust, that bond and communication.”

“It's a real moment where we see each other across the boundary of the nursery gate. It's a real conversation.”

Communication was described as relational rather than transactional. While digital apps and written updates were valued as part of the educator-family communication, quality lay in open dialogue, sharing observations, listening to parental concerns and making meaning together about a baby’s development. Families were described as needing reassurance, clarity and non-judgemental support, particularly in a period of life often characterised by uncertainty and vulnerability.

“Especially with the babies, when parents are joining the nursery, it's their first time coming to the nursery and they're hoping the nursery is going to support them.”

“We're part of their child's learning journey… It's just ‘come in, let's have a chat.’”

Partnerships were reciprocal. Educators spoke about learning from families: understanding sleep patterns, feeding preferences, cultural

practices and home routines in order to provide continuity of care. This continuity strengthened babies' sense of security, as familiar rhythms and responses were mirrored across contexts.

Structural conditions again shaped what was possible. Smaller groups and manageable workloads enabled educators to invest emotionally in relationships with families. When educators were not overwhelmed by noise and competing demands, they had the capacity to engage in meaningful conversations at drop-off and collection times, to follow up on concerns and to offer thoughtful feedback. Conversely, overcrowded or hurried environments constrained partnership, reducing communication to logistical exchanges.

''You get to know them better as well when it's lower [group size]. You know what they need, and you know the parents really well."

In this way, partnerships with families are not an "add-on" to quality in the baby room; they are integral to it. When educators and families experience mutual trust, shared understanding and open communication, babies benefit from a coherent relational world in which care and learning feel continuous and secure.

Team Culture and Reflective Practice

Team culture emerged from our research as fundamental for whether high-quality provision can be developed in a baby room. Baby room educators highlighted the importance of a sense of belonging for all

educators, together with supportive working relationships that stay solid even in the context of a challenging day.

> *“If you've got a team that you can rely on… you pick up where someone else leaves off… fitting everything in together as a puzzle piece.”*
>
> *‘When the team works well together, you’ve got quality.’*

Joy and belonging were described as indicators of quality.

> *“It's a fun place to be… you feel known. Just like with the babies.”*
>
> *“There's so much joy to be had. I think that's the reason why a lot of people continue to work with babies despite the challenges.”*

Leadership mattered deeply, resonating with work across the early years sector on the vital importance of strong leadership for nurseries (O’Sullivan and Sakr, 2022; Douglass, 2019). Baby room leaders were described as a “port in the storm,” supporting staff wellbeing and emotional resilience. This was particularly important when babies’ levels of emotional distress in the room were higher than normal, for example, when one or more babies were settling into the space and distressed by the separation from their primary caregiver.

Without reflective space and emotional support, the emotional and relational labour of the baby room can quickly become overwhelming. Educators and managers both explained scenarios where they relied on a positive and supportive team culture to carry them through a difficult

day or interaction. This needs to be a focus when it comes to ensuring high-quality provision in the baby room.

Professional Development: Building the Foundations of Quality

Along with structural levers of quality, such as group size, the government can support high-quality provision in the baby room by investing in a workforce who understand the requirements of excellent practice in the baby room. Professional development must equip educators accordingly. Two complementary elements are essential: robust pre-service preparation and sustained in-service CPD.

Pre-Service Preparation: Depth and Specialisation

Participants emphasised that working with babies requires deep knowledge of attachment, brain development and early communication. Preparation must integrate theory and practice fluidly.

> *"It has to be taught… Having that quality modelling and people showing how you can react in different situations."*
>
> *"They need to know what's happening inside [babies'] brains for learning."*

The literature evidences that baby rooms with qualified staff have higher levels of process quality (Bjornestad and Os, 2018; Degotardi,

2010). Educators reflected on the need for qualifications to integrate in-depth theoretical understanding, with sustained placements in 0-2 year old provision, along with space for critical and collaborative reflection. They recognised that this took time, and felt concerned that current qualifications were too brief in duration to achieve this ambitious interweaving of academic and practical experiences.

Specialisation for under-twos signals that baby room work is complex, skilled and pedagogical. Distinct modules, placements and assessments focused on babies would strengthen professional identity and confidence (Rockel, 2014; Gilken, Longley, and Crosby, 2023). Without specialist preparation, educators may enter baby rooms underprepared for the emotional and developmental complexity of the role.

Consistently, educators and managers voiced concerns that current qualifications do not focus enough on the very youngest children:

> *"Our Level 3 training doesn't match what's required of a [baby room] practitioner's role. There is very little to do with actually baby room practise."*
>
> *"I think before they come in, it's understanding the development of the baby and a baby's journey."*

In-Service Professional Development: Reflection and Community

While pre-service training lays foundations, quality is sustained through ongoing CPD (Dolby et al., 2023; Slot et al., 2015). Among our participants, three forms of CPD were especially valued:

1. Pedagogical Coaching

On-the-job mentoring supports reflection on real interactions as they play out. Coaching conversations that are embedded into the working day help to transform tacit knowledge into shared understanding and strengthen practice as it unfolds.

> *"The magic happens in the room… we can talk about a little bit of Bowlby… But how am I going to put that into place?"*
>
> *"Every Tuesday we observe ourselves and the children and see how we can reflect on ourselves."*

2. Baby Room Networks

Networks create communities of practice among under-two specialists. In these communities, the value and complexity of working in the baby room can be affirmed and it can help to build collective professional confidence among the participants.

> *"I'd just like some more ideas and just want some enthusiasm… you can all talk about what you might get out of it."*

3**. Flexible Online Learning**

Online learning was seen as a good option for baby room educators, resonating with work done on the role of online learning for the early years sector (Halls, Sakr, and Cooper, 2022; Wagner, 2021; Stone-MacDonald and Douglass, 2015). Webinars and online courses offer accessible, baby-specific knowledge.

> *"I've taken so much from that that I want to implement."*

However, participants emphasised that training must connect back to reflection and application.

> *"You could go on the most fabulous training… but if you don't do anything with it, you're going to lose it."*

Recommendations and Next Steps

Our research highlights that in order to improve quality across baby rooms, we need to take action at multiple levels.

Nurseries should keep baby rooms small to support close, responsive relationships, opening multiple smaller rooms rather than continuing to expand the same baby room, or at least dividing larger groups into rotating cohorts. They should invest in strong baby room leaders who can act as reflective, supportive guides and culture-setters for their teams, and protect regular time for reflection without babies present so staff can think critically about practice and team dynamics. Ongoing,

baby-specific CPD should also be prioritised, with safeguarded time for coaching, networking and online learning.

Training organisations need to develop specialist under-two pathways within qualifications, integrating theory with sustained baby-room placements so practitioners can connect research with lived experience. They should also offer accessible, high-quality CPD focused specifically on work with babies.

Policy makers should regulate maximum group sizes (for example, no more than 12 babies per room), fund and incentivise baby-specific CPD, and formally recognise baby room educators as specialists within workforce policy. Any expansion of entitlements must be matched by investment in structural quality. Researchers, meanwhile, should expand empirical study of provision for 0–2s, investigate links between group size, wellbeing and relational quality, and amplify practitioner voice in research on quality.

Conclusion

With the expansion of the early years entitlement, the stakes in the baby room are high. Babies deserve environments that recognise the distinctiveness of their developmental stage and the complexity of the work required to support it. This demands that we take care over structural levers of quality, maintaining supportive ratios and

regulating group size, along with concerted investment in the workforce through specialist qualifications and protected professional learning.

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Chapter 4: Exploring quality for babies and toddlers (0-2 years)

Charlotte Jones, Rageena Tahir and Eleanor Richfield.

Introduction

Synapses start to crackle, roadways connecting neurons are built at lightning speed, the developing brain shapeshifts from a weight of 25% of the adult brain size to approximately 70% (Bradford District Care NHS Foundation Trust, n.d). The first 24 months is a time of rapid developmental change – nerve connections in the brain and spinal cord are evolving moment-by-moment and are directly impacted by the range of stimuli and interactions had with the child. Although the brain is already formed at birth, it has not fully matured. This, then, is arguably the most pivotal 24 months of development in the human lifespan.

A high-quality, sustainable early childhood workforce and provision is therefore essential in capitalising on the period in which the brain's foundational architecture is formed. Skilled and emotionally attuned practitioners hold a unique and significant responsibility to nurture and support children's emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development during this critical window of growth, with their direct impact visible at this crucial stage and thereafter, across the lifespan.

For settings in England, the statutory requirements for babies and children aged 0–2 years are articulated within the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2025) Statutory Framework, which all registered early years providers must follow. For quality purposes, the Framework specifies an adult: child ratio of 1:3 for children under two years, reflecting the care needs associated with the rapid developmental change taking place for this particular age group. At least one practitioner caring for babies and very young children must have suitable experience of working with children under the age of two; staff without that experience must be supported or supervised by a colleague who does. Settings must also assign a ‘key person’ to each child under two, responsible for building meaningful and authentic relationships with the child and family, tailoring settling-in and care routines, and responding to the child's individual needs. This is a central lever for quality for this age range, as consistency of tailored care and attachment are vital foundations for our youngest members of society.

Alongside staffing and pedagogy, the Framework identifies and sets welfare requirements specific to babies and very young children, including safe sleep practices, hygiene and personal care, safeguarding, health and safety of equipment and premises, and food, drink and allergy management.

Whilst the EYFS statutory framework sets the minimum standards for 0–2 provision, Ofsted's 2025 research report ‘Getting it Right from the Start’ (OFSTED, 2025) draws upon setting visits, a survey of over 1,400 practitioners, and inspector focus groups. The report advised that the key person role, while generally well understood, often faces tensions in practice, for instance, when the named key person isn't the adult directly delivering the day-to-day care, leading to gaps in knowledge about a child's individual needs and, in at least one case, a risk to safety. Physical development emerged as a gap in terms of staff knowledge and understanding, a key finding further supported by Jones (2024) who identified the need for high quality professional development opportunities related specifically to clinical early childhood skills. Meanwhile, routine moments (including mealtimes and sleep) were identified as a significant but often missed opportunity for high-quality one-to-one interaction, with quality varying widely, particularly in mixed-age groupings. The report also names misconceptions that undermine quality: that provision for this age group is about care rather than education (staff who saw their role as both were found to deliver stronger provision); and that curriculum planning should be driven by "school readiness," which can leave 0–2 provision under-planned in its own right. Staff qualification level also correlated directly with depth of child development knowledge, reinforcing the Statutory Framework's

staffing and qualification requirements as a quality lever, not just a matter of compliance.

However, workforce retention (with a third of practitioners considering leaving the sector), was flagged as a systemic risk to sustaining quality improvements (OFSTED, 2025). Jones and Tahir (2026) similarly identified early years workforce sustainability as increasingly challenged by difficulties in recruitment and retention – a direct barrier to maintaining high-quality provision in early childhood education. Structural issues within qualification pathways, limited career progression, and pressures on workforce wellbeing are understood to contribute to instability across the sector. Addressing these challenges requires a stronger focus on professional support, clearer training and development routes, and improved working conditions. Long-term strategic planning and sector-wide transformation are needed to create a more sustainable, supported, and skilled workforce. Strengthening these areas will help ensure the sector can attract, develop, and retain practitioners who are championed to deliver innovative, high quality early childhood education and care.

With this contextual picture in mind, our underpinning principles for quality within this specific age range are:

- Staff Knowledge and Clinical Skill Development as the Foundation of Practice
- Consistency Across Ages, Stages and Environments
- Relationships as the Vehicle for Everything
- Assessment as a Tool for Action, Not Administration
- Parents as Active Partners, Not Passive Recipients
- Precision Over Genericism
- Reflective, Reflexive and Evolving Practice

In order to illustrate these underpinning principles, the following two case studies offer a window into the world of the 0-2 year olds nursery space across 29 settings provided by Fennies - a family-founded organisation providing education and care for children across the 3 months to 5 years age range. The Fennies 4D pedagogical framework and curriculum is grounded in research, integrating established theories of child development with the realities of contemporary childhood to promote holistic development. It positions dynamic play, dialogue driven interactions, deep dive exploration and daily real-life experiences as interconnected drivers of learning. Rather than viewing these as discrete approaches, they are intentionally integrated to shape children's experiences across the curriculum. Long-term developmental aims are translated into age-appropriate curriculum intent and everyday learning experiences, ensuring progression across the prime areas while fostering the cognitive, social and emotional dispositions associated with lifelong learning.

Case Study 1: Strengthening Emotional Regulation Through Relational Practice and Parent Partnership in the 2-Year-Old Room

"We realised we were doing all the right things in nursery—naming emotions, supporting children through big feelings—but it wasn't always being continued at home. That's when we knew we had to bring parents on the journey with us."

Rationale

Emotional regulation is a key developmental priority for two-year-olds, forming the foundation for behaviour, relationships, and future learning. However, it is not a skill that can be developed in isolation within the nursery. Research around co-regulation and attachment (e.g. Bowlby, 1969; Schore, 2001) highlights that young children require consistent, responsive interactions across all environments to successfully learn how to manage their emotions. Within multiple nurseries across London and Surrey, we identified that while educators were confident in supporting emotional regulation through relational approaches, there was inconsistency in how this was reinforced at home.

Snapshot of Practice

Our approach centred on embedding emotional regulation within process quality, with a strong focus on relationships, communication, and shared understanding. By process quality, we mean the quality of children's day-to-day lived experience in the setting — the warmth,

responsiveness and richness of the interactions between adults and children — as distinct from structural features such as ratios, resources or routines. Educators adopted a dialogue-driven approach, consistently naming emotions, modelling calm responses, and supporting children through co-regulation. This was underpinned by strong key person relationships, ensuring each child had a secure base from which to explore and express themselves. A defining strength of our key person approach is that care is never viewed separately from education. Routine interactions, including nappy changing, mealtimes and personal care, are intentionally used to build secure attachments, develop language, coach emotional regulation and support children's independence. To extend this beyond the nursery, we introduced a range of strategies to actively involve parents, recognising that families receive and process information in different ways. We therefore provided guidance through a variety of formats so that all parents could access and apply consistent strategies at home:

- **Child and Parent Promises:** A shared commitment outlining expectations for both the setting and families, including consistency in routines, emotional responses, and communication.
- **Mastery Moment Cards:** Simple, practical prompts sent home weekly, offering parents strategies to support and ‘master’ emotional regulation and communication (e.g. naming feelings, turn taking games, calming techniques).

• **Shared Assessments and Next Steps:** Parents were encouraged to share observations about their child's interests, new skills, achievements, routines and significant experiences at home, helping key people build a fuller understanding of each child's development.

These contributions were used to strengthen continuity between home and nursery and to inform personalised planning and next steps for learning at 2 year old checks, particularly around speech, language, and emotional development. This included:

• **Parent Toolkits and Workshops:** Accessible toolkits and offered webinars/workshops focusing on key areas such as emotional regulation, behaviour, and speech and language.

• **Online Community of Support:** A digital platform enabled parents to share experiences, ask questions, and access guidance, creating a sense of collective learning and support.

Impact

Children demonstrated increased ability to express their emotions verbally, with a reduction in behaviours such as biting and prolonged periods of dysregulation. This progress was driven in particular by the growing consistency of adult responses across environments: educators' repeated naming of emotions and modelling of calm in the room was mirrored at home through the practical tips, guidance and strategies shared with parents, meaning children experienced the same language, expectations and calming approaches wherever they were.

They showed greater confidence in seeking support from adults and began to use simple self-regulation strategies modelled both at nursery and at home. Parents reported feeling more confident and empowered, with a clearer understanding of their role in supporting development. Engagement levels increased, particularly in relation to contributing to assessments and implementing suggested strategies at home. One parent shared: "The home learning cards made it really simple—I didn't realise how much just talking things through with him would help. We're both calmer now." Educators also reported stronger relationships with families, leading to more open communication and a deeper understanding of each child's context. This strengthened relational quality, not only between practitioner and child, but also between parent and child. Importantly, this approach supported sustained shared thinking beyond the nursery environment. Children experienced consistency in how their emotions were acknowledged and supported, which is critical for developing secure attachments and emotional resilience.

Case Study 2: Strengthening Practitioner Knowledge of Child Development to Improve Gap Analysis and Assessment Practice

"Before we introduced the development cards, practitioners were doing their best with what they had — but observations were often broad and instinctive. Now there is a shared language and a clear

baseline. We know what we are looking for, and that means we know when something needs our attention."

RationaleHigh-quality assessment in early years depends on one foundational skill: knowing child development well enough to recognise when a child's trajectory deviates from expected patterns. Without this knowledge, even the most diligent observation remains surface-level, describing what a child does rather than understanding what it means.

At Fennies, we recognised an opportunity to further strengthen the consistency with which our ambitious curriculum intent was translated into assessment practice. While practitioners knew their children well, we wanted assessments to more consistently capture each child's developmental journey across the four key domains—cognitive development, physical development, communication and language, and personal, social and emotional development. By refining our approach, we aimed to identify emerging developmental needs even earlier, target next steps with greater precision, and maximise the value of the two-year-old progress check as an early intervention tool.

Snapshot of Practice

Our response was to introduce Stages of Development Cards, a practical, practitioner-facing tool designed to anchor developmental knowledge in daily observation. Each card sets out the minimum we

expect to see children achieving across the four domains at each age group. Rather than presenting development as a checklist, the cards are designed to build the practitioner's eye: to help them recognise the markers of developmental progress, and to notice when a child is not yet meeting those markers. The language is clear and accessible, grounded in the EYFS and in our own curriculum sequencing, so that what practitioners observe connects directly to what they know children should be working towards. The cards are not a static resource; they sit within a cycle of quality enhancement in which the actions taken as a result of assessment are regularly evaluated, and educator voice directly informs each development made to the resource.

The introduction of the cards has had a cascading effect on our assessment model:

- **Stronger, more purposeful observation:** With a clear developmental baseline in hand, practitioners observe with greater precision. Rather than recording broad descriptions of play and activity, they observe against specific developmental indicators. This shifts observation from documentation to genuine gap analysis, and it happens in real time, in the room. In practice, this means that as a practitioner watches a child at play, they hold the expected markers for that age in mind - noticing, for example, that

a child is not yet combining words, or is finding turn-taking difficult - and can respond and record that gap in the moment, rather than waiting for it to surface at a formal assessment point.

- **Monthly assessments with greater depth**: Observations now feed into monthly assessments that reflect each child's true developmental position. Where previously an assessment might confirm competence in visible skills, assessments now regularly surface gaps in less visible domains, early indicators of speech and language delay, emerging physical development concerns, or gaps in self-regulation and social readiness. These assessments create what we refer to as 'deep dives': a focused, evidence-informed picture of the whole child, not just the parts that are easiest to observe.
- **Assessment in partnership with parents**: Monthly assessments are now co-constructed with parents through our online parent portal. Families are invited to contribute their own observations of their child at home, what they are noticing, what their child is finding challenging, what they are proud of. This has transformed the assessment from a professional report delivered to parents into a genuine shared conversation. Parents arrive at 2-year-old checks not as recipients of information but as active partners in their child's story.

- **More effective 2-year-old checks**: The strengthened assessment foundation has had a direct impact on the quality of our 2-year-old checks. With deeper developmental knowledge and richer monthly assessment data, practitioners enter these checks with a clearer picture of the child and a more informed agenda for the discussion — the strengths to share, any concerns to raise, and the next steps to agree with parents. Concerns are identified earlier, the conversation with parents is more substantive, and referrals to external services, where needed, are made with greater confidence and specificity.
- **Mastery Moments: translating assessment into action**: The deep dives produced through assessment directly inform our Mastery Moments, targeted interaction plans or lesson prompts that are built around each child's identified next steps for the month. Rather than generic activity suggestions, Mastery Moments are specific, developmentally grounded, and tied directly to the areas where the child's assessment has revealed a gap or emerging need.

Critically, Mastery Moment cards are also shared with parents. Families receive simple, practical prompts that mirror what practitioners are doing in the setting, the same interactions, the same language, the same developmental intentions, presented in a format that is accessible and easy to use at home. This creates continuity of learning

across environments, extending the child's experience of targeted support beyond the nursery day.

Impact

The impact of this approach has been visible across children, families, practitioners, and the organisation as a whole.

- **Children**: Earlier identification of developmental gaps; assessments reflect true developmental position; purposeful next steps lead to visible progress month-on-

- **Families:** Parents understand their child's development in concrete, accessible terms; Mastery Moment cards bridge home and nursery; engagement with assessments has increased significantly.

- **Practitioners:** Stronger professional confidence in observation and gap analysis; reduced reliance on generic developmental milestones; observation feels purposeful rather than administrative.

- **Organisation:** Assessments are more consistent across sites; 2-year-old checks carry greater depth and referral accuracy; a shared developmental language is emerging

One parent reflected on the experience of receiving Mastery Moment cards:

> *"I never really knew what to do beyond reading and playing, the cards gave me something specific to try. I could see it was making a difference and it felt like we were all working together on it."*

We believe that when practitioners deeply understand child development, everything becomes more intentional, the observation, the assessment, the environment, the interaction. This is not a programme we have introduced. It is a shift in how we understand our professional role, and it is one we will keep building.

Conclusion

Taken together, the evidence and practice explored in this chapter point to a consistent picture: quality provision for babies and toddlers cannot rest on regulatory compliance alone. The EYFS framework sets essential minimum standards around ratios, key person allocation and welfare, while Ofsted's 2025 findings show where these standards can still fall short in practice — most notably around the depth of the key person relationship, staff confidence in clinical skills (Jones, 2024), and the persistent misconception that 0–2 provision is about care rather than education. The seven underpinning principles set out earlier in this chapter offer a route beyond compliance towards genuine quality, and

the case studies bring these principles to life. Here, relationships, precision and reflective practice are not abstract ideals but achievable through practical tools such as Mastery Moment cards, Stages of Development Cards, and structured parent partnership. What emerges most strongly across both case studies is that quality is relational and cyclical: practitioner knowledge strengthens observation, observation strengthens assessment, and genuine parent partnership extends this consistency into the home. Sustaining this quality, however, remains contingent on addressing the workforce retention and progression challenges identified by Ofsted and reinforced by Jones and Tahir (2026). Without a stable, well-supported workforce, even the strongest pedagogical frameworks are difficult to sustain at scale.

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Chapter 5: Quality for Three- and Four-year-olds

Elizabeth Carruthers, Maulfry Worthington, Susan Rogers and Susan Wilcox

Introduction

> *'Quality is nothing if not relative, and there are no magic formulae, only many adjustments to suit each set of circumstances'*
>
> *(Penn, 2011, p. 6).*

Three- and four-year-olds in England are entitled to 15 hours funded nursery education. In the year that they are four some children might spend most of their time in the more formal setting of a reception class in school. There is much concern that four-year-old children should not be placed in a reception class (Bamsey et.al., 2020) as the ratios of adult to children are less and the pressure to achieve education goals is heightened (Rogers, 2010). In most other countries in the world children start formal education much later, when they are six, or seven as in Finland.

Being not becoming

When thinking about 'quality' we might ask how children's 'ways of being' are reflected in our understanding of the concept. Consider, for

example the four-year-old walking from home to school with her mother. She runs ahead, skipping, hanging off the bars of the barrier outside the school, singing a song she has learned from her big sister. She calls out to her friends along the street. These every day, taken-for-granted interactions with people and places illustrate some of the simple but important ways in which children experience the world around them. But what happens to these spontaneous and embodied expressions of what it means to be a child in the world today once children enter into early years settings? Young children may struggle to contain these often physical and vocal expressions in more structured environments. Even more challenging for children is making sense of the rules, regulations and teaching styles adults bring to the setting, particularly if the focus is on 'ways of becoming' a pupil, a 'rising five', a school child.

So, when we think about quality the starting point must be the child's understanding of the world, how they think and move and learn best. By taking the child's perspective, we can better understand what is meant by an appropriate environment, curriculum objectives and pedagogy. To be able to do this an understanding of children's agency is important, because this lies at the heart of any child-led or play-based approach. By agency, we mean here the child's ability to act or make choices in the early years setting. These choices will inevitably be constrained by the structures that comprise social life (Archer, 2003).

Who are three- and four-year-old children?

There is a two-year difference between three-year-olds becoming three and four-year-olds as they approach five years of age. Each month in this two-year period their parents or carers can see a notable development, as they did when their children were of a younger age. The period before five is a critical period of development in a child's life (Conkbayir, 2021) where 90% of brain growth occurs. It requires educators' sensitive and acute understanding of children and their development if children are going to thrive and continue to be the curious and enquiring individuals they are.

At the age of three most children have already acquired fluent language, their repertoire of words, phrases and meanings growing daily. Physically, most children can run, jump, throw a ball, climb, ride a bike with ever increasing skill. They are forming friendships and becoming independent in play and self-help skills like dressing. They soak up knowledge and are constantly asking why questions.

The adults in their lives

The most important people in many children's lives are their immediate family. Children's lives are tied up with their community and family cultures, as they live and breathe in a cocoon of attachment. Any pre-school, reception class or childminder who hosts these lively and

adventure-seeking individuals must not only know them in school life but be aware of their family culture because that is the main context of their knowing. At the heart of the collaboration between the adults in the setting and the child is the premise that their family life is valued and valuable. The adults around the child are crucial when children enter a school or pre-school environment. Respectful and caring relationships are vital because 'children learn to be strong and independent through secure, loving relationships' (DfE, 2025, p.8).

Below is one parent's view on quality and what she believed was important for her children who have special needs.

> "The main thing to me is PSED. Staff and children need to feel safe and cared for, you have to get that right first. The psychological environment is vital, leaders of schools and nurseries must have children and staff welfare as a priority. Children need to feel secure the moment they step into their nursery, for example seeing their names and knowing that they have a peg for their coat and a tray for their belongings. They have to be engaged straight away perhaps in self-registration or involved in conversation with their key person about some interesting resources she/he has provided as a focal point. Children function better when they know routines and are aware of what is happening next. I think children thrive in small cosy groups where the key person approach (Elfer, Goldschmied & Selleck, 2012) is practiced. Large nurseries often overwhelm some children,

especially children with special needs and communication difficulties. There needs to be a listening and caring atmosphere where child and educator interactions are positive and engaging. Children feel safe if they understand the behaviour expectations, knowing boundaries. You just know when you walk into some pre-schools the ethos is loving and caring and the staff are experienced early childhood educators who strive every day to provide the best for the children."

Listening

Listening to children's views, ideas and preferences supports planning for the three-and four-year-old. However, Colliver (2014) challenges us by saying when children are listened to, to what extent are they truly being understood? Drummond (2012) emphasises that if the adults in the setting do not notice aspects of children's learning then this may result in more adult-led provision for they might not have truly heard the children's views. Democratic practices are more likely to facilitate socially inclusive relationships (Lancaster, 2003) and foster authentic (genuine) listening.

Thoughtful educators

If we are searching for sound practice in schools and early years settings for three- and four-year-olds, then, as Biesta (2024) offers, we need thoughtful educators. Educators who are interested in knowing more about children and their learning and willing to analyse their pedagogy, observe children closely and offer reflections on their findings. The teacher/practitioner researcher offers a more in-depth window into

children's thinking and as a result can develop pedagogies that enrich children's learning (Carruthers, 2026). Leaders who support a culture of enquiry, encouraging teachers and practitioner research where early years educators constantly and carefully reconsider their practice and their understanding of children, are more likely to provide high level provision for young children (DfES, 2002). Child-adult interactions rely on the quality of the professional learning experiences of the adult educators, and in turn their ability to interact in ways that are supportive of children's agency. In settings where adults feel under pressure to meet externally imposed objectives, they may work in ways which do not necessarily align with their values and knowledge of how to support child-led learning. But most important for adults is to understand the way in which children experience the provision and the adults around them.

There are many aspects of early childhood practice that must be considered when trying to define quality, but there are two main areas that surface as essential for children to thrive: play and outdoor experiences. These need to be an essential part of any early years setting. There is much evidence that children prosper and seem to have a natural way of being in play and outdoor environments (Bilton, 2010; Carruthers, 2026). Play is the way children of three and four years learn about the world and outdoors is where they want to be.

Play

In order to develop quality, all those working with young children must have a secure understanding of the value of play, the many forms it may take and how to facilitate play within their setting. For three- and four-year-olds play is at the heart of their everyday world, for them 'play is king' (Paley, 2007, p4). The three-year-old wants to play with other children but they can also play on their own. As they become four, most children are masters of play, communicating freely with other children and adults the themes of their play worlds. As Smith (2023, p.5) states 'play is a spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable and flexible activity […] and is typically done for its own sake'

Pretence and Imaginary Play

In the west, we use the word 'play' as a general term for various activities, but for Vygotsky 'play' is only pretend-play,

> *… the child starts with an imaginary situation when initially this imaginary situation is so very close to the real one. A reproduction of the real situation takes place.*
>
> *(Vygotsky, 1967, p. 16)*

Imagination is a cognitive ability, 'to form mental images, sensations, or concepts of things' Miriam-Webster): it acts as a foundation for creativity and problem solving, and includes mathematics and science, engineering, play, story-telling and art. Kushnir asserts that

‘imagination makes new things out of old parts. It is an act of generating, from bits of old knowledge, new ideas, and new possibilities’ (2022, p. 1).

Children may fantasise about monsters or imaginary creatures, promoting strong emotional reactions (Harris, 2000). They may pretend that they are a superhero, drawing from television shows or films, climbing and leaping from a height and calling out as the superhero might. Development matters (DfE, 2025, p. 12) affirms that ‘Pretend play gives many opportunities for children to focus their thinking, persist and plan ahead’. However, it should be cautioned that this focusing, persisting and planning in play is not the same as when children partake in adult-led tasks. Children’s play is more subtle, flexible and with no expected outcomes.

Brooker argues that in many settings, genuine child-initiated pretend-play, ‘voluntary, goal-less, spontaneous – but which for children is entirely serious’ (2011, 162), has been ‘displaced by a more systematic induction into social patterns of meaning’ (Parker-Rees, 1999, 61, cited in Rogers and Evans, 2008, p.37), ‘so that requirements in literacy and numeracy can be met’. Wood and Atfield (2013, p. 48) maintain that pedagogical approaches to play ‘privileges adults’ provision for play, which, according to Wood (2019), is better understood as ‘eduplay’.

But even when children are free from such expectations, common practice is for teachers and practitioners to plan and resource pretend-play, creating areas such as a hospital or a travel agent. For children such themes may be unfamiliar, and it's doubtful that they will make personal meanings in this play (Rogers and Evans, 2008, p. 36). These pressures can be particularly acute for children in Reception classes, where direct, adult-led 'subject' teaching often dominates, and time for play is often marginalised.

Researching child-initiated pretend-play, Worthington and Van Oers(2016) highlights the extent to which three-and -four-year-old children readily drew on their lived experiences, their play being highly imaginative and originating with, and belonging to, the child. This sense of genuine ownership engenders agency as they make choices and decisions and direct the course of their play. Manyukhina, (2026, p. 26) proposes that children's agency is attainable when adults look beyond the dichotomy 'of structure and freedom'. Moreover, Robinson (2022) found that when children have agency, their play is richer, more complex, creative and flexible.

Funds of knowledge

In genuine free play, children draw on their cultural knowledge or 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 2006; Worthington, 2018), which Brooker (2010, p. 39) contends is 'a form of apprenticeship' to the

children's own cultural worlds. For example, Isaac's dad was a builder and introduced him to building skills and various technologies, and many of Isaac's pretend-play episodes focused on playing builders, and technologies such as a security safe; an electronic card-reader and a speed-camera, while Shereen, whose family valued preparing and eating meals together, engaged in play about shopping and ordering food in cafes. In their pretend-play, personally meaningful mathematics and writing often spontaneously occurred (Worthington & van Oers, 2016), thereby challenging any need to plan pretend-play areas to meet curriculum demands.

Early years settings which achieve quality environments for three- and four-year-old children have play at the core of their provision (Carruthers, 2023). Rich and meaningful play is only possible in settings with a democratic culture in which children's ideas, choices and decisions and how they express them are valued and supported, and generous time is provided, with adults available to observe and sometimes participate in that play.

Outdoor play in early years settings

A quality early years curriculum for three- and four-year-olds would view the outdoor environment as of equal value to the indoor classroom. Moreover, if children can move seamlessly between the two environments, in what we think of as 'free flow' play they will

combine elements of indoor and outdoor learning, mix materials and resources in creative and innovative ways and develop a sense of place and space. In this way regular access to the outdoors offers children agency to explore and test out their capabilities which often exceed our expectations.

In addition to the many physical benefits of being outdoors, young children come into contact with a range of multi-sensory, first-hand experiences such as feeling the effects of the weather and related temperatures, coming into direct contact with the textures and smells of natural materials such as grass, ice, earth, water and wood. Garden areas, walls, fences, and tarmac surfaces, provide an interesting array of features, textures and mini environments for children to explore. A small grassy hill or a few shrubs can be transformed into mountains and forests as children engage in imaginative play. Open-ended resources such as large boxes, curtains and large construction materials encourage children to create imaginary worlds and develop complex narratives, allowing play to develop on a larger scale (Rogers and Evans, 2008).

To achieve high quality learning outdoors, children need adults who are comfortable in the outdoor environment and understand the wide-ranging benefits it brings. Quality outdoor provision, then, is not simply to be found in the materials and physical spaces on offer to the

children, but critically in the quality of professional learning and pedagogical practices of adults. But there are also different challenges inherent in outdoor spaces. Play and exploration, particularly in outdoor spaces, by its very nature, involves children taking risks which push them beyond their current capabilities and challenge them physically, socially and cognitively. For adults, managing risk can be challenging too and can lead to anxieties about how far they can allow children to explore and push boundaries. Certain types of play can also pose a risk to adults' own boundaries about what is acceptable behaviour, particularly within the heavily regulated classroom. Beames (2013) argues that there is growing evidence to suggest that in the developed Western world an increasingly regulated, risk averse approach is severely limiting children's opportunities to practise some of the vital skills which would enable them to exercise good judgment about what constitutes risk and danger. Waite et al (2013) also note that adults in early years settings may hold an exaggerated view of what constitutes a risk to young children, stemming from their own personal anxiety about potentially threatening situations, about the potential for disorder within the group and a genuine anxiety about litigation while in *loco parentis.* Clearly the views held by adults will strongly influence the nature of provision and the extent to which children have license to explore their environment. Indeed, research studies confirm that opportunities afforded to children to take risks are

highly dependent on how risk is viewed by adults (Waite et al., 2013).

Children need time, space and flexible resources to develop outdoor play that allows for risk-taking but so that it does not become the main or leading focus of planning for the outdoor play. Rather high-quality early education outdoors will focus on children initiating activities, seeking and experiencing challenge and engaging in new experiences through trial and error.

Beyond the nursery gate

The immediate outside space of an early years setting, however challenging you might make it, will never be as adventurous, for example, as a forest or a beach (Carruthers, 2026). The nursery terrain is predictable, it offers smooth pathways and although increasingly planned for more daring possibilities, such as those mentioned previously, it is still offers limited opportunities for. The woods, beaches and mountains offer the children real encounters with nature. Flora and fauna are in abundance and opportunities naturally arise and are unpredictable, making the landscape full of awe and wonder. The important Early Learning Goal, The Natural World (DfE,2025) emphasises that children should have knowledge of the natural world. In a study by teacher researchers (Turvey, cited in Carruthers, 2026) who wanted to learn about how three-and four-year-old children are in the forest, one adult in the setting reflected,

"When you go with the children, they explore in an in-depth way, much more so than when I would explore if I went on a walk in the forest. They will notice completely different things. I wouldn't dig in the soil to find the little creatures and notice how matted the leaves are and what they're like. Looking at the mulch as the leaves bed down. It does remind me of my childhood, playing in that sort of way. But it's a learning experience, I enjoy experiencing the forest in that way, smelling the soil and looking up and seeing the way spiders hang their webs in the branches of the trees. There's a whole learning experience all the time about how the forest is."

When we are thinking about quality learning experiences for three-and-four-year-old children we need to think beyond the immediate outdoor space. There is a whole world beyond the pre-school gates which young children need to know about. It is so important that children connect with nature because they cannot take care of it, if they do not know about it.

However, beyond the nursery gates there is also an abundance of urban opportunities and each early years setting has different landscapes to investigate. Some are, for example, near train stations, canals, city farms, allotments, harbours, museums and play parks. The ordinary to adults is not necessarily familiar to young children, for example; road works, building sites and high-rise window washers. Going on a bus or train is exciting to children, bringing new experiences and thinking. The very best early years settings capitalise on the neighbourhood their setting is in, to bring children authentic

experiences.

Conclusion

As the quote at the beginning of the chapter states, quality is relative and there are no magic formulae (Penn, 2011). There are multiple aspects of providing quality education and care to three-and-four-year-olds. Besides taking a firm stand on promoting child-centred approaches, in this chapter, we have also highlighted aspects of quality from different perspectives including children and parents. Viewing provision from the perspective of the children, evaluating the degree to which they can exercise agency and their capabilities in the environment through play and other child-led activities is vital, if we are to achieve the highest quality provision. To support children's enquiries and freedoms, above all in their early childhood settings, young children need to know that their adult educators are good listeners, taking an interest in all that they explore and do.

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Chapter 6: Exploring quality: Working in Reception Classes

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Introduction

As this chapter explores what ‘quality’ means in a Reception Class context, it seeks to identify key structural conditions and process elements that create the foundations upon which effective pedagogy, positive relationships and children's learning can flourish (Palaiologou 2023). It offers insight derived from the perspectives of adults working in Reception classes, and coordinators of the Reception Class Teacher Network (RCTN) in England, who have reflected on literature, lived experience and dialogue within a community of practice.

Structural Quality: The Foundations of Reception Provision

Structural quality refers to the relatively stable and regulatable features of provision, including workforce qualifications, staff-to-child ratios, and class size (Bonetti, 2018; Pascal, Bertram and Rouse, 2019). These elements are often described as the "iron triangle" of quality because of their interconnected influence on children's experiences and outcomes.

Research consistently identifies workforce qualifications as one of the strongest predictors of quality in early childhood settings (McAleavy, Challender and Walker, 2024, OECD, 2021, Manning et al, 2017 to name but a few examples). The presence of graduate-level adults and qualified teachers is associated with richer interactions, more effective pedagogical decision-making, and improved outcomes for children (Bonetti, 2018; DfE, 2017a). Within Reception classes, the statutory framework requires at least one 'school teacher' per class of up to thirty children (DfE, 2025 p32). While this requirement and newly published Reception practice guidance (DfE, 2026a, DfE, 2026b) recognises the importance of specialist pedagogical knowledge during the transition into statutory schooling, evidence suggests that qualifications alone are insufficient if adults are unable to enact responsive and relational pedagogies due to other structural constraints. High-quality practice depends not only on what adults know, but also on their capacity to apply that knowledge in meaningful interactions with children (Rose and Rogers, 2012; Fisher, 2024).

Staff-to-child ratios represent a second critical component of structural quality. Lower ratios allow adults to spend more time engaging in sustained shared thinking, observing children's interests, scaffolding learning and supporting emotional wellbeing (Pascal, Bertram and Rouse, 2019). Evidence from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) and the Study of Early Education and Development

(SEED) projects highlight the importance of adult-child interactions in driving children's developmental and educational outcomes (DfE, 2017a; DfE, 2017b). While Reception classes in England operate within a statutory ratio of one teacher to thirty children, this figure is notably higher than ratios recommended in many international contexts. Comparative evidence suggests that smaller groups of around twenty children provide greater opportunities for individualised support and stronger relationships, particularly for younger children who are still developing self-regulation, communication and social competence (Bonetti, 2018).

Related to staffing ratios is the issue of overall class size. Research indicates that smaller classes are associated with greater educational effectiveness, particularly when adults are able to respond flexibly to children's interests and needs (McAleavy, Challender and Walker, 2024). Large Reception classes can create challenges for adults to provide the experiences that characterise effective early childhood pedagogy. For example, Shonkoff (2007) highlights the importance of responsive interactions in shaping children's developing brain architecture, suggesting that structural conditions (for example higher numbers of responsive adults) which enable frequent and meaningful adult-child engagement are likely to have long-term benefits.

Structural quality should therefore be understood as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for effective Reception provision. Workforce expertise, staffing levels and class size create the conditions within which pedagogy, inclusion and relationships can thrive. Where these structural elements are strong, adults are better positioned to offer the responsive, developmentally appropriate and relational experiences that underpin effective Reception practice. These elements are explored in the next section on process quality.

Process Quality: The Overarching Principles of the EYFS

Quality requires that the four principles of a Unique Child, Positive Relationships, Enabling Environments and Learning and Development are at the forefront of provision centred in play, providing “quality and consistency” (DfE, 2025 p.7). In acknowledging the ‘unique child’, teachers and leaders recognise and value that children develop and learn at their own pace, and every child is capable and resilient. This relies on practitioners “empathy and compassion”, so each child feels “known” (Malomo and Laurence, 2025 p.48), requiring well considered transitions processes and inclusive and equitable pedagogical practices. Establishing ‘positive relationships’ is at the heart of supporting children’s emotional wellbeing and sense of security. Practitioners taking a “triangulated” approach, work with parents and

caregivers, to understand the child's needs, personality, background, culture and prior experiences. This open family communication builds trust and supports safeguarding and wellbeing. These early relationships are vital for children to develop confidence, independence and resilience (Bowlby, 1969). Creating 'Enabling Environments' is an ongoing process of considering and curating spaces and resources both indoors and out, to meet children's developmental needs and interests; valuing child-led, exploratory play (Kay and Buxton 2024) and recognising the environment as the 'third teacher' (Edwards et al., 2011). When considering the 'Learning and Development' principle, teachers ensure a balance of play and opportunities across the seven EYFS areas (prime and specific) (DfE, 2025 Early Years Coalition 2021).

To ensure every child receives a consistent and well-balanced early learning experience through child-centred and inclusive approaches, The statutory principles described above need to be embedded into practice. Therefore, process quality can be explained through the pedagogy adopted in Reception classes.

Process Quality: Through Intentional and Responsive Pedagogy in Reception Classes

A principled approach places the unique child at the centre of practice; recognises their right to participate and to be heard and values their

connections within their family, community and cultures. It embeds inclusive approaches, valuing diversity and considering the whole child to enable development and learning through play (Early Years Coalition, 2021). Critically, it requires a balanced or hybrid approach which blends "adult instruction with play-based, child-led, relational approaches, incorporating adult-scaffolded learning objectives" (Pascal, Bertram and Rouse, 2019, p.39), enabling adults to balance developmental sensitivity (Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Albäck, 2017) and nurture with intellectual challenge (DfE, 2025, DfE 2026a).

Play-based environments form the foundation for effective teaching and learning in the EYFS (Sylva et al 2004). Play-based learning involves provision for a combination of adult initiated, adult supported, child initiated and children's independent learning. Adults who recognise and enable children's motivations of curiosity, exploration, connection, and imagination, support holistic, healthy development and acquisition of both educational content and foundational learning skills and dispositions (Zosh et al., 2017, Early Years Coalition 2021). It is through meaningful play that children are supported to take a step beyond their current abilities (Bruce, 2023) and are motivated to think more deeply. Nurturing creative thinking skills encourages children to draw on their imagination, prior knowledge, and experiences to form ideas and working theories. This creativity, supports critical thinking, enabling children to solve problems, test strategies, and evaluate their own

learning (Early Years Coalition 2021). The initiation of activities is significant in this respect, with opportunities for children to take initiative, self-manage, and direct their own learning associated with enhanced outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Recent evidence confirms this and identifies long term outcomes, particularly for less advantaged children, (Pascal, Bertram and Rouse, 2019).

Creating and Thinking Critically forms one strand of the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning (CoETL), alongside Playing and Exploring and Active Learning. The CoETL, embedded within the EYFS Statutory Framework (DfE, 2025) and further expanded upon within national guidance documents (Early Years Coalition, 2021, DfE, 2021, DfE 2026b), have been recognised as essential in developing children's capacity for lifelong learning. They underpin all seven areas of learning and development (Tickell, 2011) and are increasingly recognised within research for their importance in developing self-regulation and executive function (Pascal, Bertram and Rouse, 2019). Strong executive function is linked to greater independence, improved problem-solving, and higher attainment as well as better emotional wellbeing and behaviour (Willoughby et al., 2012). However, these skills do not develop automatically; they must be intentionally nurtured.

Adults in reception classes play a crucial role in acknowledging and articulating the importance of the CoTEL in school settings. For example, adults can deliberately plan activities and guided opportunities for these characteristics, as well as nurturing them through interactions when working in the moment with children or celebrating them when children are engaged without an adult. They can also be showcased through classroom displays, discussed within the staff team and included in progress reporting or parent communications.

By introducing children to the language of thinking linked to the CoETL, adults begin to build the foundations of metacognition. Young children can demonstrate metacognitive behaviours, particularly through play and dialogue with adult support (Whitebread et al., 2009). Key strategies include modelling thinking aloud, explicitly teaching learning strategies, encouraging reflective talk, embedding reflection within play, and developing a shared language for thinking. Environments rich in this language enable children to better understand how they learn. For example, visual prompts or character-based approaches, such as a 'Persevering Parrot', support children to recognise and reflect on the skills they are using.

The CoETL can be easily neglected, particularly in Reception classes where there is pressure to focus on outcomes, and this risks overlooking the importance of how children learn. Whilst there is no longer a statutory duty to report on CoETL, Dubiel and Kilner, (2017) found that 77.7% Reception teachers believe they should be recognised within assessment, accountability and outcome measures.

Prioritising high-quality interactions is also consistently linked to positive child outcomes. Strong foundations in speech, language and communication are the building blocks for learning and among the strongest predictors of later development through school and in life (Law et al., 2009, Law et al., 2017). Language is essential for thinking, expressing feelings, making friends and finding solutions (Shuey & Kankaraš, 2018) and frequent episodes of high-quality adult-child interactions, specifically 'sustained shared thinking' (SST), create the best learning outcomes (Sylva et al., 2004). In SST, extending conversational moments and developing children's thinking also opens the door to careful scaffolding of more complex language, including discussions about past events, storytelling, questioning, and shared reflection (EEF, 2018).

Extensive recent research confirms high-quality interactions involve responsiveness, emotional support, and opportunities for sustained shared thinking (EEF, 2025). Coaching, collaboration and continued

professional development (CPD) opportunities for adults are causally related to quality (EEF, 2019) as demonstrated in the following example from a teacher's practice.

Case Study: Process Quality; Prioritising engaging interactions

My previous school had a significantly higher than average number of children with SEND, EAL and those attracting pupil premium funding. Children entered Nursery and Reception with very low baseline data for Communication and Language. Our challenge was to improve Communication and Language outcomes. Initially we focused on implementing 'Sustained Shared Thinking' between adults and children to explore ideas, solve problems, or clarify understanding through conversation.

Staff professional development sessions focussed on SST and high-quality interactions, using examples from Siren Films to see how adults can model, explain, wonder etc. We also introduced the ShREC approach (EEF, 2025). The impact was remarkable. Words were in play almost all the time in our EYFS classrooms - noticed, investigated and savoured. The adults were the most important element in this environment; alert to opportunities to use sophisticated, interesting and precise language within interactions.

Since joining my new school, I have continued to champion high quality interactions. Working with a new team of teaching assistants - new to

Reception this year, I have modelled SST and coached them in its use. What I have found in both schools is that high quality interactions work best when the child feels known, understood, cared for and loved.

An intentional approach to pedagogy brings into play knowledge of strategies that support development and learning as well as specific curricular intentions. Adults bring both together in a 'double move.' (Hedges and Cullen, 2012, p.936), building on children's motivations and extending development and learning by scaffolding, sensitively introducing them to new experiences and ideas. Evidence from Reception teachers themselves (Dubiel and Kilner, 2017) demonstrated that pressure to achieve specific outcomes can lead to the adoption of approaches more associated with KS1 and beyond. Therefore, in Reception, the flexibility afforded by the statutory framework (DfE, 2025) needs to be harnessed confidently to ensure Reception retains "A balanced teaching approach which incorporates play-based and relational pedagogic approaches, alongside more structured learning and teaching" (Pascal et al., 2019 p7). Pedagogy in Reception requires an understanding of children's development and how very young children learn (Early Years Coalition, 2021, DfE 2026a). It includes recognising, and sometimes advocating for, the importance of play and playful encounters; knowledge of the individual needs, funds of

knowledge, and interests of their children as well as curricular intentions. Such specialist knowledge and understanding informing intentional, relational, responsive, and inclusive practice is required to ensure, as advocated by Ang (2014), that education is in the best interest of each child's well-being, development, and learning.

Process Quality: Carefully Considered Assessment and Transitions

Observation and formative assessment, enable adults to see and know the child in the context of their lives and experiences, recognising their knowledge, understanding and skills together with their interests, cultures and needs. This begins before the children start their Reception year, as adults manage transitions and conduct meaningful assessments that go beyond collecting data. Effective transition is a process, not a one-off event. It encompasses an "Enabling Environment" (Early Years Coalition, 2021) that considers both the physical classroom and a "cultural environment" rooted in strong relationships. By fostering a sense of belonging, personal and social well-being become the cornerstone of lifelong learning (Lee and Veale, 2025).

A successful start requires adults to understand the "Unique Child" within the context of their "unique family." This depth of knowledge is built through home visits, preschool observations, and transition

activities within school, both with parents and children (DfE 2026a, DfE, 2026b). Such engagement allows for initial assessments that support a holistic understanding of the child and enabling adults to plan for and interact meaningfully with them. The case study below shares examples of how this could be enacted in practice.

Case Study: Process Quality; Utilising on entry assessment and transition information

Reflecting the evidence in *Getting it Right in the EYFS* (Pascal, Bertram, and Rouse, 2019), our setting prioritises the Prime Areas (Personal, social and emotional development (PSED), Communication and language (C&L) and Physical development (PD)), particularly during the first half-term of the Reception year. This focus ensures foundational skills are secure before introducing more advanced learning (DfE 2026a). For example, our first topic invites children, as experts in their own lives (Clark and Statham, 2005), to present "Marvellous Me" boxes to their classmates, providing vital baseline assessment opportunities for C&L and identifying needs for Speech and Language or PSE support early. We intentionally select texts within our topics to reflect our class make up, ensuring these act as windows or mirrors for the children and families in our class (Bishop, 1990).

We have integrated an explicit focus on teaching and understanding the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning. By celebrating learning attitudes, such as resilience and independence over outcomes, we prepare children for the demands not only of Year 1 but to thrive now inside and outside of the school environment (Moylett, 2022, Stewart, 2017, Early Years Coalition, 2021). This focus on metacognition helps parents and pupils alike understand how they learn, fostering attitudes that last far beyond the Reception year.

Physical Development (PD) is similarly prioritised through "heavy work" and targeted interventions. We timetable daily gross motor "body boogie" sessions and intentionally structure our continuous provision to promote play with large loose parts such as tyres, crates, and wooden blocks. These develop core strength through their manipulation as well as their final use, often resulting in climbing activities or obstacle courses. These activities help to develop core strength and proprioception necessary for focus and fine motor success (McFee et al., 2026), as well as cross-curricular development and positive dispositions, such as teamwork, turn taking, motivation and speaking and listening skills.

Ultimately, through extended handovers and careful planning, we are weaving a deliberate curriculum with the family, community and

cultural context in mind, to create a nurturing environment where every child can unlock their full potential.

Transition from Reception into Year 1 is not simply a shift in curriculum and staffing; for many children it represents a profound emotional and social change that must be considered with as much care as the transition into Reception itself (Stevenson, 2025). Recent DfE guidance highlights the importance of relationships, familiarity, communication with families and understanding the unique child (DfE, 2026a, DfE, 2026b). These principles remain equally important as children continue their educational journey beyond the Reception class.

Where continuous provision does not underpin Year 1 pedagogy, children may move from a familiar environment built around play, relationships and exploratory learning into a space that feels increasingly formal and performance-driven, creating 'pedagogical discontinuity' (Nicholson, 2018). Fisher (2010) found that children themselves noticed this shift and the greater expectations for sitting still. Rather than creating pressure for Reception classes to increase formality, these findings should highlight the need for transition practices that are co-developed with Year 1 adults and enable children to start their journey in the year 1 classroom with familiar pedagogical approaches.

Beyond a shared understanding of how young children learn, Reception and Year 1 adults enable smooth transitions through the sharing of knowledge about individual children. This goes beyond a single meeting and Good Level of Development (GLD) data as this fails to capture the complexity of knowledge required to teach well (Stevenson, 2025). For example, it does not acknowledge CoETL, relationships, communication approaches or experiences beyond school. An understanding of how children learn, interact and respond to challenge, alongside their interests, cultural background and home learning experiences, is equally vital for adults throughout the school.

A meaningful transition process takes place across the year and considers the setting's size and structure. In small schools, pupils may remain in mixed classes or already know Key Stage 1 adults well, whilst in larger settings they may move rooms or buildings. Whatever the context, transition strategies support familiarity, emotional security and understanding of the child (Lee and Veale, 2025). This may involve ongoing professional dialogue, shared observations, visits to Year 1 spaces, collaborative planning, family-engagement, play-based approaches, SENCo involvement, and opportunities for Year 1 adults to spend time within Reception provision, not to carry out 'transition activities' but to experience the environment and interact with children in *their* space.

Conclusion

In summary, quality in Reception cannot be reduced to structural indicators, statutory requirements, or assessment outcomes alone. While qualified staff, appropriate ratios, and effective systems provide an important foundation, it is the quality of relationships, interactions, and pedagogical decision-making that ultimately shapes children's experiences and development. Qualifications are therefore a necessary but insufficient condition for quality if adults lack the time, autonomy, and supportive conditions needed to enact responsive and relational pedagogies. Professional development that is sustained, collaborative, research-informed, and grounded in observation, reflection, coaching, and adult inquiry is more likely to strengthen quality than one-off training events. Opportunities to engage with professional learning networks, action research, and specialist early childhood expertise can further support effective practice.

At a policy level, improving adult-child ratios, reducing class sizes, strengthening access to specialist early years professional development, protecting pedagogical autonomy, and recognising the distinct nature of Reception within the education system would better enable adults to provide the high-quality, developmentally appropriate experiences that young children need to flourish.

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Chapter 7: Exploring Quality: Working with Five to Seven Year Olds

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Introduction

Quality provision for five to seven year olds must be built on the foundations of best practice in Reception. Transition must be smooth and seamless in both pedagogy and practice so that children build on what they currently understand and can do in ways that enable them to continue as secure, confident learners. The pressures on schools to demonstrate attainment in the National Curriculum mean that some of the most effective elements of early years pedagogy, with the strongest evidence base, become ignored.

It is important to note that, in England, the Statutory Framework for the EYFS (DfE 2025) sets the standards for children 'from 0 ***until the 31 August after their 5th birthday.*** Many late Summer-born children still fall under this remit long after their transition to Year 1. They are entitled to continue a pedagogy that recognises their uniqueness as learners. The Four Overarching Principles that form the core of the Statutory Framework (2025) are key here, and must be understood throughout KS1 as children develop. Every child is a 'unique child' and this does not change in Y1.

However, it is not only Summer-born children who may struggle if they encounter provision and practice that is not developmentally informed. As this chapter will highlight, children in KS1 are still in need of, and respond to, a pedagogy that is informed by child development, sensitive to their individuality and appropriate to their needs.

Research and practice increasingly support play-based and developmentally informed approaches beyond the EYFS, but in many schools there is still a significant shift in pedagogy between Reception and Y1. The pressure of accountability, assessment expectations and perceptions of what effective teaching should look like within formal schooling structures (Gray, 2024), all serve to transform children's experiences from having the 'unique child' at their heart, to demanding compliance and conformity to an external agenda.

Child development literature describes how, at ages 5-7, children have a strong inner drive to learn what interests and fascinates them. To actively explore, investigate, grapple with, and play. These are summed up as the *Characteristics of Effective (Teaching) and Learning* in the EYFS, and are the foundations of early learning. Children learn more effectively because, when learning is self-driven, it leads to increased motivation, engagement, and satisfaction: all of which are known to be

critical features of deep level understanding, learning and development.

Case Study: Year 2

The development of continuous provision in our Year 2 classes was prompted by an unease that a formalised approach was not meeting the needs of all learners. We began with a clear vision: to create a learning environment that recognised the needs of our children, and that valued play, talk, movement and autonomy as integral, not additional, to learning.

The journey has required us to think differently. Some staff found it challenging to step back and trust children to lead aspects of their learning. There were also external pressures, particularly around accountability, that challenged our resolve. We addressed this through professional dialogue, research, and developing ways to evidence progress beyond traditional written outcomes. A key focus has been on articulating the pedagogical intent clearly, ensuring that evidence of learning includes well-being, involvement and progression.

Over time, the impact has been evident in the quality of engagement and the growing independence. Children demonstrate sustained involvement in their learning, are immersed in rich language and talk, and explore ideas in ways that suit them best. The classroom has become a place where all children can find a point of entry.
This continues to be a reflective journey, but one that reinforces a key belief: that high-quality, play-informed practice and academic rigour are not opposites, they go hand in hand.

In KS1, whilst adult-directed learning is necessary, it is not sufficient (Fisher 2020). The Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning

are developed most effectively through play. It is in play that children have agency, it is this agency that gives meaning to learning for many children who find an adult-led agenda can be too challenging or, sometimes, meaningless. All children need opportunities to show what they can do, what they know and, critically, what engages and interests them. When children engage in high quality play, teachers often comment that they see children differently, becoming aware of what they 'can do' rather than what they cannot. In addition, those who manage the adult-led curriculum well, can struggle when faced with a play scenario where they are expected to think for themselves. All children need play.

The place of play is therefore important when considering neurodiversity, inclusion and equity within KS1 provision. Increasingly formal approaches can create barriers for some children, particularly those with differences in communication, attention, sensory processing or emotional regulation. High-quality provision must therefore recognise that flexibility within the learning environment benefits all learners, not only those identified with additional needs. Policy must explicitly recognise neuroinclusive practice as a feature of quality provision rather than an additional intervention.

It is widely recognised, that play is not only valuable for children now, in their present development, but will be valuable for their future. The

world of work is alert to the fact that skills learned through play, such as problem-solving, initiative, self-regulation, flexibility and collaboration, are the very skills need in the workplaces of the future. Greater continuity between EYFS and KS1 policy would help schools create learning environments that are relevant to the uncertain, ever-changing world of the 21st century.

Professional development

In order for the teaching profession to plan for learning in ways that are developmentally appropriate, professional development at all levels must be recalibrated. Current teacher education programmes in England, whatever their type or length, give teachers insufficient grounding in child development, and do not develop the knowledge required to facilitate and support play with confidence. But until Initial Teacher Education is no longer mandated to focus heavily on statutory frameworks, on-going professional development for those responsible for pedagogy remains essential. The most effective professional development takes place over time and offers the opportunity to reflect and revisit issues in order to deepen understanding. The most successful training for KS1 teachers introduces key principles and research and then explores the critical role of the environment, the creation of adequate time for uninterrupted learning, and the necessity of appropriate, sensitive adult support. Such learning in depth should

not, and cannot effectively be hurried, but must be introduced over time, with local networks of schools coming together regularly in order to share practice, problem-solve collaboratively and celebrate achievement.

Just as important as the professional development of teachers is the professional development of head teachers. Too many of those responsible for KS1 practice in schools and academy trusts are appointed without experience or expertise in the early years. Head teachers now have considerable influence over the pedagogy in their school and it is here that KS1 is particularly vulnerable.

Case Study: Year 1

In my Year 1 classroom in a private school, most children arrived with strong early literacy and social skills, yet our formal, desk-based approach was not meeting their deeper learning needs. Despite good attainment, engagement was uneven, and independence was limited. It became clear that when we were doing structured, adult- led tasks we were not fostering curiosity or resilience.

I shifted towards a play-based learning model, rooted in my values of independence and intrinsic motivation. ***This was not universally supported****; a lack of CPD and senior leadership alignment created barriers. Through 'principled non-compliance' Huddleston et al. (2024/2025), I ensured I met statutory requirements while adapting provision to better suit the children.*

> *Through provision and practice, carefully planned provocations, and **weekly reflection informed by professional reading and networks**, I observed significant impact. Children became more engaged, collaborative, and confident in problem-solving and quality improved, not through more structure, but through more intentional interactions and responsive teaching*

Many head teachers may be aware of the value of play – but do not yet fully appreciate its contribution to learning. Yet research reinforces the message that when leaders develop greater understanding of child development and play-based pedagogy in KS1 they become more confident about, and more likely to implement, playful approaches to teaching that are relevant for all children.

Gray (2024) writes:

> *One consistent finding (across this work) has been that sustainable change depends heavily upon leadership. Schools where leaders actively engaged with research, created opportunities for professional dialogue and prioritised staff confidence were more likely to sustain high-quality provision over time. This work demonstrates that high-quality provision in KS1 is not about replicating Reception, nor about abandoning curriculum expectations. Instead, it is about creating environments where children are met where they are developmentally and emotionally, enabling them to feel included, capable and motivated to learn*

The development in understanding and growth in commitment of leaders in schools, comes from visiting other schools implementing a

play-based approach, reading more about the impact of play on learning and development and talking to and supporting enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff.

Whilst all of these strategies are valuable, what is required is that national expectations are set so that any head teacher without EYFS experience or expertise must undertake a mandatory early learning course, containing substantial elements of child development and the contribution of play to learning, before they take up post.

Case Study: The Head Teacher

*Play-based learning in KS1 is all about the **'and'**. We still have a timetable, we teach the national curriculum, we have teacher-led carpet and group sessions and children have access to a rich variety of resources in the continuous provision. It's often thought that it's a choice between play and learning. We have proved that it can be both.*

*As Head teacher, I must know that children are covering the national curriculum and reaching expected standards. It was when I saw the quality and quantity of writing children were producing by the end of Year 2 **and** their high levels of engagement alongside the bonus learning from their play that I knew there was no going back.*
One of the biggest challenges is the misconception that play-based pedagogy means no teaching. Children still need to be taught and play provides meaningful opportunities to apply skills, follow curiosity and develop independence.

There are also tensions with accountability systems and perceptions of what learning 'should' look like, especially as children get older. School leaders can feel nervous to introduce a different approach as it can be dismissed as unrealistic or maverick.

Confidence was built here as informed pedagogy was modelled by teachers throughout the Key Stage. The core message from this case study is:

Research and observations highlight that play develops the executive function skills needed for all learners: concentration, perseverance, organisation, problem-solving, and resilience.

Standing on the shoulders of giants

It is interesting to reflect that none of this pedagogy is new. We stand on the shoulders of giants. For example, Montessori (1912) came to realise that it was not that the children she worked with had difficulties, rather it was the nature of the learning environment and the approaches that were inappropriate:

Often the education of children consists in pouring into their intelligence the intellectual content of school programmes. And often these programmes have been compiled in the official department of education, and their use is imposed by law upon the teacher and the child.

(Montessori 1912, p 28)

Psychologists, educators, researchers and writers from Piaget to Steiner, from Malaguzzi to Bruner, from Froebel to current researchers such as Tina Bruce all place play at the heart of quality learning and development for children from birth to eight years of age. We ignore their knowledge and expertise at children's peril.

The evidence base for promoting a developmentally informed pedagogy in KS1 is also strengthened by current early years experts in the field, developing practice to inform the thinking of KS1 teachers. The 'Playoneering®' (Peacock, 2026) approach is one such. Deeply rooted in the philosophy of Reggio Emilia (Cagliari et al., 2016), it offers a transformative pedagogy built on three central ideas: playful rigour, enquiry-based learning, and character education. The approach adopts the Reggio concept of the environment as the third teacher (Edwards et al., 2011). Workshops are filled with open-ended materials inspiring wonder and enquiry. All this aligns with the National Curriculum. Educators start with the child and work outward, mapping children's self-directed discoveries against expectations. This means curriculum is covered through deep, contextualised, motivating enquiry projects rather than isolated tasks.

Other schools have found adopting OPAL (Outdoor Play and Learning) (2024) as a positive factor in their journey towards more play-based learning. OPAL schools upgrade their outdoor spaces where practice draws on: an all-weather ethos - embracing mud, puddles and the natural environment; the use of 'loose parts'- tyres, wooden pallets, crates, ropes, encouraging children to build, invent and reimagine; the management of risk - so children learn to assess risk for themselves, learn boundaries and build resilience.

One final approach has been developed by a Y1 teacher and successfully shared through in-service training. The 'Do, Plan, Do, Review Approach' builds on the High/Scope programme 'Plan, Do, Review' (Cagliari, P. et al 2016). The teacher believes firmly that before young children can 'Plan' they first need to 'Do'. In her school, children Play, then reflect on their play and exploration and 'Plan' ways they might develop it. These plans are recorded. Children return to their Play, make adjustments, then 'Review' with their peers what happened. As the play process is evaluated and refined, children are encouraged to write their reviews in small groups as well as independently in their project books. This ownership of the 'Review' process has proved an effective way of children not just improving the quality of their exploration and play but also writing and recording

purposefully as an effective strategy for evaluation. The team are also constantly reviewing the model to reflect on the impact made.

Developmentally informed practice

The role of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) has been highlighted throughout this chapter as a critical element to enable and empower educators working in KS1. While models of CPD are continually developing, its quality is overly dependent on the calibre of those delivering training and their knowledge of KS1 pedagogy. It is crucial that professional development is in the hands of those who share the pedagogy outlined in this book and that there are clear opportunities for educators to reflect on, embed and fine tune their practice over time. This focus on informed pedagogy must start in Initial Teacher Education. Currently, however, the focus here is on statutory frameworks, the 'what' rather than the 'how'. Teacher training and CPD is too often undermined by the promotion of more formal ways of learning in the EYFS and KS1, with teacher instruction at the expense of play.

Research indicates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are most sensitive to the dimensions of quality. Effective CPD must lead educators to consider decisions, approaches and strategies that most effectively support the range of children with whom they work. The

case studies are examples of effective and inclusive strategies. A quality pedagogical approach in KS1 must place equity and diversity at the centre. Inclusive provision goes beyond representation; it requires practitioners to consider whose voices are heard, whose needs are prioritised and how systems may unintentionally disadvantage some children. Developmentally informed approaches provide greater opportunities for collaboration, communication and agency, enabling a wider range of children to engage meaningfully in learning and experience a sense of belonging within the classroom community. Rather than expecting children to adapt to inflexible systems, schools must work with staff to adapt provision and remove barriers to participation

Central to this must be an in depth understanding of how the EYFS Profile, alongside robust data, secures at least a partial picture of attainment and likely trajectories. While its predictive capacity is well documented, the data must be used to inform successful transitions for children so that trajectories for success are fully realised. It has been made clear throughout this chapter that the National Curriculum is not prescriptive. This needs to be much clearer in policy and national understanding. There are multiple opportunities for schools to develop consistency and continuity into KS1 (see Fisher 2020). Supporting and showcasing innovative and successful approaches that blend pedagogies to follow children on this learning journey will instil a level

of confidence and courage to enable educators to act on their professional judgement and to ensure any definition of quality includes process as well as outcomes. Each of the case studies has evidenced the importance of children's learning behaviours. There is a strong evidence base to propose that the role of Learning Behaviours (described as the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning in the statutory EYFS) need to be acknowledged, supported and evaluated as children move into KS1. The continuity of valuing the nature of learning and how children express, represent and communicate this remains central to shaping successful children.

While KS1 classes have some autonomy in aspects of assessment, recording and accountability, clear guidance on the importance of Learning Behaviours would focus thinking and intentionality in terms of aspirations for children.

Conclusion

This chapter, focusing on KS1, has set out some guiding principles on achieving quality in the transition from the EYFS, by embedding a developmentally appropriate, sensitive and informed pedagogy in Y1 and beyond. Many five and six year olds continue to learn most effectively through their own self-directed activity and, therefore, for all children to flourish, such experiences need to be part of their

everyday experience. There has to be a clearer understanding on the part of all teachers and senior leaders that play is not an 'extra', but rather that it offers children skills, competencies and understandings that an adult–led agenda never can. Because play offers children agency, rather than agency resting with the teacher, it frequently motivates willing and effective learning.

The role of the teacher in skilfully supporting both adult and child-led learning demands an approach that is responsive, flexible and sensitive to being the right adult at the right time. Knowing which learning is most appropriately achieved through play and which must be taught in direct adult-led ways. Developing the skill necessary to be this sensitive and responsive adult must be a requirement of ITE. Until it is, high quality CPD is necessary in every local authority and multi-academy trust so that those who train are sufficiently well informed in child development to be able to offer expert guidance to KS1 staff. The quality of pedagogy and practice in schools is a reflection of the competence, knowledge and vision of leaders. Without the principled support of teachers in KS1, pedagogy and practice can too easily fall back into what children must be taught rather than how they can learn. Our children deserve to be in schools where such knowledge, understanding and commitment ensures that each of them experiences a learning day in which, as unique individuals, they can thrive and grow.

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Conclusion: Developing Quality

Viki Veale: Chair of TACTYC

The early years of a child's life are a period of rapid growth and development. This text has explored how well trained, responsive educators ensure high quality, developmentally appropriate experiences for children in a variety of settings. While statutory structural requirements define funding levels, set standards and influence the governance of our settings, it is the process quality or relationships within the settings that define how they are experienced by children, families and those who work with them.

Every child deserves the best possible experience of education and care and in order to achieve that, we must remain mindful that 'quality is not a destination but a journey' (Early Years Coalition, 2025). This collection of reflections has included case studies exemplifying how settings are constantly striving to develop the quality of their provision. However, Sims and Waniganayake (2015) caution that when external notions of quality are at odds with the needs and interests of young children, rather than raising quality they can actually erode the professional confidence required to achieve this.

We urge settings to reflect for themselves on how they define quality, considering what it should look and feel like for the children and

families they work with rather than how it might be measured. This should be the guiding vision that helps settings and the individual educators within them to plan their own quality development journey. The next step is to develop the professional confidence to articulate this vision and take others on that journey with you.

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